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2004

# URDU TEXTS AND CONTEXTS

THE SELECTED ESSAYS  
*of*  
C.M. Naim



AM 0368789 Code I-E-2003312858

15 UNIVERSITY OF MICHIGAN

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*Published by*

PERMANENT BLACK

D-28 Oxford Apartments, 11, I.P. Extension,  
Delhi 110092

*Distributed by*

ORIENT LONGMAN PRIVATE LTD

Bangalore Bhopal Bhubaneshwar Chandigarh  
Chennai Ernakulam Guwahati Hyderabad Jaipur  
Kolkata Lucknow Mumbai New Delhi Patna

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ISBN 81-7824-075-0

Typeset by C.M. Naim

Printed by Pauls Press, New Delhi 110020

Binding by Saku

To  
THREE EXEMPLARY TEACHERS

NAZIR AHMAD  
SYED EHTISHAM HUSAIN RIZAVI  
ALE AHMAD SUROOR

# TRANSCRIPTION OF URDU WORDS

Instead of a strict transliteration, I have used a simple phonetic transcription to represent Urdu words; it is as follows:

Consonantal letters in the Urdu alphabetical order:

*b, p, t, t, s, j, c, h, k, d, d, z, r, r, z, z, s, s, s, z, t, z, ', g, f, q, k, g, l, m, n, n, v, h, h, y.*

Vowels:

*a, â, i, î, u, û, e, o, ai, au.*

## Preface

A baker's dozen of assorted articles; a meagre harvest for these many years. Each essay has been revised to correct the more obvious errors of grammar and diction, and to clarify where, I felt, my words were confusing or ambiguous. Further, I have added new references in many footnotes to draw the reader's attention to the latest findings of other scholars. My original conclusions in these studies, however, have not been altered.

I was helped by many when I wrote these essays, and now again as I revised them. They cannot all be named here, but they have my gratitude.

C. M. Naim

Chicago, 2002





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## The Art of the Urdu Marsiya\*

Within the Urdu literary milieu and unless preceded by some qualifier, the term *marsiya* [*marsiya*], refers only to one thing: a poem describing some event related to the martyrdom of the Prophet's grandson, Imam Husain, at Karbala in 680, composed, more often than not, in the six-line stanza form, *musaddas*. Further, it always implies contextual details: it is meant to be declaimed in a somewhat dramatic fashion at a *majlis-i- 'azâ*, i.e. a gathering of the devout seeking to obtain religious virtue by listening to the story of Imam Husain and his companions and by shedding tears over their tragic fate. Thus, it should be kept in mind that a *marsiya* in Urdu is primarily not meant for private perusal in moments of leisure, that it has a particular public/religious context, and that it also has a somewhat edifying goal besides the usual literary purposes that any good poetry has.

Marsiyas in Urdu were first written in the sixteenth century in South India, in the kingdoms of Golkonda and Bijapur, which were Shi'ite in orientation and closer to the Iranian religious traditions than the Turk and Pathan kingdoms of North India. In the beginning, marsiyas were written either in the two-line unit form, *qasida*, or in the four-line unit form, *murabba'*. No particular meter was preferred, both long and short meters being equally common. These marsiyas, not overly long, were usually sung, often set to some suitably mournful raga. In the *murabba'* form the fourth line was often a refrain, repeated by the accompanists of the *marsiya*-re-

\* Revised. Originally appeared in *Islamic Society and Culture*, ed. Milton Israel and N. K. Wagle (New Delhi, 1983), pp. 101-116.

citer and perhaps also by the audience. The recitations took place both outdoors in a procession and indoors. For that reason, the early marsiyas were shorter in length as well as simpler in structure, than is the case now, and emphasized more the grief and lament-inducing [*mubkī*] elements of the narrative, such as the death of some hero and the consequent lament [*bain*] over his corpse. Marsiyas in the *qasīda* form were generally more atomistic, whereas the *murabba'* form seems to have allowed for better thematic continuity. In either case, the story element was not overly emphasized. All this is also true for the early, i.e. the eighteenth century, marsiya in North India, with the addition that the North Indian poets used a great many more forms for their poems, and that their poems tended to be a bit more fragmentary.<sup>1</sup>

Slowly, over a century or so, the *musaddas* came to be regarded as the most suitable form for a marsiya. That preference, it seems, was directly related to certain contextual developments. Firstly, the marsiya moved indoors permanently. Secondly, the poets, instead of singing, took to declaiming it, using dramatic gestures and other devices of elocution. The singing style was given a new name, *soz-khvānī*, and the earlier traditions were reserved for that purpose alone. The new marsiya, however, developed its own traditions very soon, with the nineteenth century Lucknow and its Shi'ite state contributing the most to its development. Thus, by the middle of the nineteenth century, there were established what have come to be regarded as the fundamental characteristics of a good marsiya in Urdu. These are as follows:

1. A marsiya is invariably in the form of a *musaddas*, the first four lines of each stanza [*band*] having one rhyme-scheme (i.e. the same *qāfiya* and the *radīf*), and the remaining two lines, referred to as the *īp*, having another. Usually the first four lines extend the story line, while the *īp*, expected to

<sup>1</sup> Unless cited otherwise, the historical discussion here and later, is based on Masihuz Zaman, *Urdū Marsiye Kā Irtiqā* (Lucknow, 1968), and Sifarish Husain Rizavi, *Urdū Marsiya* (New Delhi, 1965).

be an exceptionally good couplet, provides a mini-climax as well as a pause in the discourse. While avoiding the monotony of a single rhyme-scheme, it allows for moments of rest in the process of public presentation.<sup>2</sup>

2. Certain medium length meters are preferred, specially those that could enhance the dramatic effect of the declamatory style of delivery.

3. Each marsiya is usually devoted to just one hero or incident, and shows conspicuous narrative continuity. Secondary themes are allowed, but only as they complement the main theme.

4. Any marsiya can have all or some of the following subsections in so far as they may be allowed by the chosen theme.<sup>3</sup>

(i) *Āihra*: a prologue which can have for its subject a praise of God, the Prophet, Ali, or the poet himself, a description of some natural phenomenon, or some other matter related to the main theme, such as the hardships of travelling or the emotional intensity of filial ties.

(ii) *Mājarā*: some event or incident that would introduce the main hero. It also emphasizes the story element within the marsiya.

(iii) *Sarāpā*: a detailed description of the physical and/or spiritual qualities of the hero.

(iv) *Ruḡsat*: the hero's departure from the Imam's camp after due preparation and taking leave of the Imam. In the case of the Imam himself, his bidding farewell to his sister, his wife and his surviving children.

(v) *Āmad*: the hero's arrival on the battlefield.

<sup>2</sup> The basic structure of a *musaddas* stanza is actually similar to a ghazal couplet's. The first four lines of the stanza form a singularity, which is then made complete by another singularity, the *ṭip* couplet.

<sup>3</sup> The scheme presented here is based on Masihuz Zaman, *Urdū Marsiye Kā Irtiqā*, Masud Hasan Rizavi, *Rūh-i-Anīs* (Allahabad, 1931), and an extended reading of Anis' published marsiyas.

(vi) *Rajaz*: the hero's declaration of his noble ancestry, personal virtues, and superiority as a warrior.

(vii) *Jang*: the hero's battle, usually one-on-one [*mubâraza*] first, followed by one against many [*mujâdala*]. Most likely, included within it would be sub-sections praising the hero's horse and/or his sword. Often another sub-section would describe the intense heat of the day, underscoring the water-less hero's plight and his courage.

(viii) *Sahâdat*: the hero's death on the battlefield, but only after his being overwhelmed by the enemy horde—in the Imam's case, only when God commands him to cease fighting.

(ix) *Bain*: the lamentations of the female relatives of the hero.

(x) *Du'â*: the pious sentiments of the poet himself, usually of a prayerful nature, expressed in just one or two stanzas. The lines may contain the name of the poet, rarely also some patron's name.

Needless to say, the above scheme is not, nor it ever was, entirely inflexible. Individual sections can be moved around, particularly the initial. Also, not all marsiyas have all the sections. A marsiya describing the Imam's departure from Medinah, for example, can not possibly have an explicit *sa-hâdat* scene; it can, of course, be hinted at. The full scheme is found mostly in the marsiyas that deal with the events of the day of the martyrdom itself, the 10th of Muharram, 61 A.H. A look at even a handful of marsiyas by any of the nineteenth century masters will make any careful reader quickly aware of the keen sense of organization and proportion that good marsiya writers show. They do not just plunge into the tragic parts, nor do they allow a monotonously lachrymose effect throughout the poem. They display a fine awareness of the needs of their audience. The pious listener wants pathos, but just as much a strong affirmation of his faith too; he cries out for tragic figures, but also longs to laud brave heroes; and he wants the poet to display to him situations that would melt even the hardest heart, but in such manner that they also enhance his fortitude in the face of his own insignificant adversi-

ties. As one analyses a marsiya one clearly sees the poet interspersing periods of relative relaxation and exaltation with periods of intense emotional involvement, and thus gradually leading toward the highly charged lamentatory outburst at the end. The tears-inducing type stanzas are referred to as *mubkî*, the other as *gair-mubkî*, and in a good marsiya the two are intermingled most carefully. The marsiya writer seeks to gain from his audience *vâh* (Bravo!) in the beginning and *âh* (Woe!) at the end, and both during the long middle part. And to achieve the two, a marsiya writer must excel in his authorial control over three milieus, *bazm*, *razm*, and *bain*, i.e. the milieu of conviviality away from the battlefield, the brutal milieu of the battlefield, and heart-rending lament, respectively.

To make the above plain, we next examine the contents and structure of the famous marsiya of Mir Anis (1802-1874) that begins with the line, *jab qat' kî musâfat-i-şab âftâb ne*, 'When the sun cut short the night's long trail.'<sup>4</sup> It is in the usual *musaddas* form—its meter a variant of *muzâri'*—and consists of 197 stanzas [*band*]. Though its main theme is the martyrdom of the Imam himself, it contains several secondary themes too, which makes it more interesting than many another, but not unusual. A rough analysis suggests the following sections. (The numbers in the brackets refer to the stanzas.)

I. At the first signs of dawn, the Imam awakens his companions; they gather for the morning prayer, each of them a paragon of spiritual virtues. (Stanzas 1–10; the first *mâjarâ* begins; it also contains some elements of *sarâpâ*.)

II. A description of the morning in the wilderness; nature itself sings praises of the Creator. (Stanzas 11–21; *cihrâ*.)

<sup>4</sup> I use the critically established text published by Masud Hasan Rizavi, op. cit., pp. 197–236. Considered a masterpiece of the genre, this marsiya has been translated into English—David Matthews, *The Battle of Karbala: A Marsiya of Anis* (New Delhi, 1994)—and also recorded by Zulfikar Ali Bukhari for an LP issued by HMV (Pakistan).



III. Ali Akbar, the Imam's eldest son, performs the call for prayers; his aunt, Zainab, who particularly loves him, cries out in anguish and premonition. (Stanzas 22–26; the first *mājarā* continues.)

IV. On the Imam's side there is a congregational prayer led by the Imam, but on the enemy's side only battle preparations; as the prayers conclude, some arrows fall near the Imam, making him anxious about the children; he goes into the tents to bid farewell to the ladies. (Stanzas 27–40; end of the first *mājarā* and the beginning of *ruḳsat*.)

V. Abbas, the Imam's half-brother, stands guard at the door. (Stanzas 41–42; *sarāpā* of Abbas.)

VI. The Imam asks Zainab to bring him the relics of his ancestors—the Prophet's robe, his own father's sword, and such—and gets ready. (Stanzas 43–53; the second *mājarā*, containing also the *sarāpā* of Husain.)

VII. The Imam's banner is brought forth; the young sons of Zainab beg her to recommend their names to the Imam to carry the banner; she scolds them. (Stanzas 54–68; the third *mājarā* begins.)

VIII. The Imam praises the two boys, then at Zainab's recommendation sends for Abbas to give him the banner. (Stanzas 69–74; the end of the third *mājarā*, and the beginning of the fourth.)

IX. Abbas takes the banner; Sakina, Husain's youngest daughter, asks Abbas to bring her some water from the river; Husain and Abbas leave the tents. (Stanzas 75–88; the end of the fourth *mājarā*; the final *ruḳsat*.)

X. The martial prowess of the Imam and his companions; the houris praise them. (Stanzas 89–96; *sarāpā*.)

XI. The Imam's enemies start the battle; his companions go out to fight and are killed one after another; the Imam brings each corpse back to the tents. (Stanzas 97–108; the fifth *mājarā*.)

XII. It is mid-afternoon and the Imam is all alone; he goes into the tents to take a final look at his infant son, Ali Asghar; a deliberately shot arrow kills the infant in the Imam's

lap; the Imam buries the tiny body. (Stanzas 109–113; the sixth *mājarā*.)

XIII. The Imam comes to the battle field. (Stanzas 114–115; *āmad*.)

XIV. A description of the intense heat. (116–126; a second *ḡihra*.)

XV. A heated exchange between the Imam and Ibn Sa'd, the enemy commander; the battle begins; the Imam fights with the entire army; a praise of his mighty sword. (Stanzas 127–152; *jang*.)

XVI. Unnerved by the ferocity of his attacks and the intensity of the heat, the Imam's enemies seek his refuge; the Imam, as it befits him, sheaths his sword. (Stanzas 153–162; the seventh *mājarā*.)

XVII. Ibn Sa'd taunts his soldiers; two of the most fierce attack the Imam; at God's command from God, Husain unsheathes his sword again, and kills the two. (Stanzas 163–175; the end of the seventh *mājarā*; a second *jang*.)

XVIII. Another Divine command tells Husain to cease from battle; the Imam bows to God's Will; he is surrounded by the enemy and killed. (Stanzas 176–186; *ṣahādat*.)

XIX. Fatima, the Imam's mother, laments his death in Paradise, and Zainab, his sister, on the battlefield; Husain's voice is heard comforting the latter. (Stanzas 187–196; *bain*.)

XX. A concluding stanza of pious sentiments and modest self-praise. (Stanza 197; *du'ā*.)

Before proceeding with the analysis further, it would be useful to underscore two features that appear to be both common and crucial to all marsiyas. The first is the belief—what may be called the *leitmotif* of the Urdu marsiya—that life is followed by death followed by life again: more precisely, Life (transitory) leads to Death (transitory), which in turn leads to Life (eternal). The second is the practice to develop the marsiya's primary and secondary themes in terms of binary oppositions. These binary distinctions arise out of a conviction that Islam itself is anchored in a dichotomy between Islam and

Non-Islam.<sup>5</sup> They gain greater scope and effectiveness from another dichotomy that is crucial to the understanding of most Islamic literatures, that between the *zâhir* (the external, and hence the 'un-real') and the *bâtin* (the internal, and hence the 'real'), the two levels of significance or meaning that every word or act is commonly believed to have. In the above-mentioned *leitmotif*, the cessation of life is only the *zâhir* of death, its real meaning, the *bâtin*, is the eternity of the hereafter. Thus, an inherently 'Muslim' person would look at the internal meaning of death and welcome it, whereas the one who is inherently 'Non-Muslim' will be afraid of death and cling to the life here. The Imam and his followers challenge the authority of Yazid, the temporal Caliph who must be obeyed; their action is a rebellion, but only to the superficial, since their action's true cause is their already absolute submission to a far greater authority, God. As 'Muslims,' they choose the rewards of the hereafter over the triumphs of this world. Further, the Imam, having submitted his will to God's, and his companions, having done likewise through him, have, as if, become integrated with, and integral to, the cosmos itself. When they pray, everything in nature prays, and when they are in wrath, nature is also wrathful. They already exist in an eternal time, while their enemies' fate will remain a transitory glory.<sup>6</sup> And so Husain and his companions are

<sup>5</sup> 'The Qur'anic outlook divides all human qualities into two radically opposed categories, which—in view of the fact that they are too concrete and semantically too pregnant to be called "good" and "bad," or "right" and "wrong"—we might simply call the class of positive moral properties and the class of negative moral properties, respectively. The final yardstick by which this division is carried out, is the belief in the one and only God, the creator of all beings. In fact, throughout the Qur'an there runs the keynote of dualism regarding the moral values of man: the basic dualism of believer and unbeliever.' T. Izutsu, *Ethico-Religious Concepts in the Qur'an* (Montreal, 1966), p. 105.

<sup>6</sup> For a detailed discussion of the social and political ramifications of these beliefs in the context of the Iranian tradition of *rauza-ḡvânî*, see Gustav Thaiss, 'Religious Symbolism and Social Change: The Drama of Husain,' in

killed, but 'Islam' triumphs; Yazid wins the battle, but 'Non-Islam' loses the war. As Muhammad Ali, the famous nationalist leader and a Sunni, put it in an equally famous couplet,

*Husain's murder is, in fact, Yazid's death;  
after every Karbala, Islam comes to life again.*

Returning to our analysis, when we identify our marsiya's *mubkî* and *gair-mubkî* stanzas we find that simultaneous with their previously described organization in terms of themes, they display another arrangement of an equally significant kind.

Thematic Sections	<i>Gair-Mubkî</i>	<i>Mubkî</i>
I. <i>Mâjarâ</i> 1 (1–10)	1–17	18
II. <i>Çihrâ</i> (11–21)	19–25	26
III. <i>Mâjarâ</i> 1 (22–26)		
IV. <i>Mâjarâ</i> 1; <i>ruksat</i> (27–40)	27–33	34–35
V. <i>Sarâpâ</i> (41–42)	36	37–39
VI. <i>Mâjarâ</i> 2 (43–53)	40–43	44–45
VII. <i>Mâjarâ</i> 3 (54–68)	46–49	50
	51–66	67–68
VIII. <i>Mâjarâ</i> 4 (69–74)	69–81	82–83
IX. <i>Mâjarâ</i> 4; <i>ruksat</i> (75–88)	84–85	86–88
X. <i>Sarâpâ</i> (89–96)	89–96	
XI. <i>Mâjarâ</i> 5 (97–108)	97–105	106–113
XII. <i>Mâjarâ</i> 6 (109–113)		
XIII. <i>Âmad</i> (114–115)	114–123	124–126

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*Scholars, Saints, Sufis: Muslim Religious Institutions Since 1500*, ed. Nikki R. Keddie (Berkeley, 1972), pp. 349–366; also Hamid Algar, 'The Oppositional Role of the Ulama in Twentieth Century Iran,' in the same, p. 234.

XV. <i>Jang</i> 1 (127–152)	127–153	154
XVI. <i>Mâjarâ</i> 7 (153–162)	155–161	162
XVII. <i>Jang</i> 2 (163–175)	163–177	
XVIII. <i>Sahâdat</i> (176–186)		178–196
XIX. <i>Bain</i> (187–196)		
XX. <i>Du'â</i> (197)	197	
197 stanzas	148	49

The fact immediately strikes us that only one-fourth of the marsiya consists of *mubkî* matter; the rest is exaltatory, celebrating the piety, bravery, resoluteness, and other virtues of the heroes of Karbala. Further, except for the expected, long outburst at the end, the *mubkî* stanzas have carefully been placed, usually in ones or twos, at various strategic points. They act as sharp, but brief, reminders of the main tragedy, and also as quick transitions between major sections. It becomes evident that Anis put much careful thought in the organization of his stanzas, and the lines within them; and that what he did was primarily dictated by the demands of oral presentation.<sup>7</sup>

In another famous marsiya—*Namak-i-kvân-i-takallum hai fasâhat merî*, ‘My fair speech is the salt that flavours discourse’s feast.’—Anis lists the many things that he, as a marsiya poet, desired God to bestow on him. ‘Lord,’ he begins, ‘give me the eloquence [*taqrîr*] that could soften rocks into wax. // Give my verses the force that tears have.’ Next he prays, ‘May I follow none but my ancestors. // God, let my verses show no confusion [*gunjlak*], no obscure [*mugliq*] word, and no bad ellipsis [*ta‘qîd*].’ His next strong wish is that he be able to create scenes of both *bazm* and *razm*, while using only the everyday speech of the gentry [*rozmarra surafâ kâ*],

<sup>7</sup> The only, and most useful, book on the subject of marsiya recitation is Nayyar Masud, *Marsiya-Kvânî kâ Fan* (Lucknow, 1990).

and declares that each has its unique quality and power, just as the verse that brings tears to the eye. Then he concludes, in the *tîp* couplet of the stanza, by praying, 'May God that I depict grandeur [*dabdaba*], describe hardships [*masâ'ib*], and sing praises [*tausîf*] too. // May my listeners' hearts rejoice as well as grieve, and also acclaim.'<sup>8</sup>

A prominent feature that deserves some comment is what some consider an incongruent use of indigenous socio-cultural values and practices in the depiction of the martyrs of Karbala—i.e. the heroes and heroines are Arabs, but the poet makes them behave like the *surafâ* (gentry) of Lucknow. The objection is pedantic. The fundamental goal of the marsiya writer is to make the piety-filled audience respond in an intensely emotional manner. The Indian-ness in the descriptions and details brings the events intimately close to the Indian audience, and makes it easier for the latter to identify with the martyrs of Karbala. Historical accuracy would create a gulf between the poem and its audience, and thwart the poet and his audience in their main task of bearing witness to the lives of a group of idealized human beings of the past who could yet be emulated, however meagrely, in the present.

Muhammad Sadiq has remarked, 'By assigning such a large place to pathos the poets as well as their readers and listeners appear to have overlooked a very important fact, namely, that if the characters are made to wallow in distress, they would come perilously close to losing their dignity and therefore forfeiting the readers' respect.'<sup>9</sup> The above analysis clearly indicates that better poets do not emphasize the lachrymose element, they give it only its relative prominence. Sadiq's fear is also misplaced since he ignores the actual context—a *majlis-i-'azâ*—for which the poet writes a marsiya. There is also another reason. We should be careful using only our own time-and-space bound values when we bring into

<sup>8</sup> Masud Hasan Rizavi, *Rûh-i-Anis*, pp. 177–78.

<sup>9</sup> Muhammad Sadiq, *A History of Urdu Literature* (London, 1964), p. 153.

consideration the people of a different period and place. We may validly not find attractive the ideals of manhood that the nineteenth century Lucknow cherished, we may even regard the heroes of the Urdu marsiya as being overly sentimental or 'effete,' but there is no gainsaying the historical 'reality' and religious 'truth' of those ideals. The Imam in the marsiya must be, and is, firm as a rock in the face of incredible odds, yet he must be emotional enough to shed open tears too, for shedding tears was a sign of being human as well as a cherished value in the Shi'ite milieu of the nineteenth century Lucknow.<sup>10</sup>

If we look at a marsiya in isolation, i.e. outside its context of a *majlis-i 'azâ*, we might get a feeling that it presents only a despairing vision. That it begins with life, but ends in death. As already pointed out, that is not truly the case. In a *majlis*, a marsiya is preceded and followed by *fâtiha*, a prayer that essentially confirms the immortality of the human soul. The tears of the audience are themselves a witness to the fact that the sacrifices of the Imam and his companions had not been in vain, and that in their death lay their victory. Thus the events of Karbala become a narrative of what should be the ideal role for mankind in this world. No wonder then that the pious come out of a *majlis* filled with exultation, and not dejected and despairing.<sup>11</sup>

Urdu marsiya writers are frequently criticised for being repetitive. At the same time, they are also faulted for using contradictory or conflicting details in different marsiyas. Again, the criticism arises out of a lack of sensitiveness to the true context of the marsiya. The marsiya writers were not writing

<sup>10</sup> There are many relevant Shi'ite hadith. According to one, Prophet Muhammad promised his daughter Fatima that his followers will for ever shed tears over the brutal death of her son, thus compensating for the tragic but destined event. See Gustav Thaïs, '*Religious Symbolism*,' p. 357, where he quotes another similar Shi'ite tradition from G. E. von Grunebaum, *Muhammadan Festivals* (New York, 1951), pp. 91-94.

<sup>11</sup> Cf. Gustav Thaïs, '*Religious Symbolism*,' pp. 356-57.

epics about the events of Karbala. Rather; they wrote longish poems about individual heroes and incidents. They did that scores of times over, as their profession demanded—their being a professional was integral to their being a poet. That naturally led to repetition, and, sometimes, to apparent contradictions. And that would indeed create in us an adverse reaction if we were to read a large number of marsiyas at a single sitting. But that, again, would be an error. A marsiya exists only for the purpose of being read in a *majlis* and, as such, to become the high point of a religious ritual. Rituals, in order to maintain their functional efficacy, allow for little or no variation. The devout come to a *majlis* with certain expectations which have to be met by the poet. A radical departure from the tradition may perhaps produce an interesting poem, but it cannot be expected to imbue the poem with that power of alleviation that a more traditional marsiya would have for the piety-minded listeners.

Having said that, we must add that great marsiya poets, e.g. Anis, are never really repetitive. Within the apparently rigid pattern available to him, Anis is successfully innovative and original. He uses in different marsiyas, for one, different legends about the same person, while remaining faithful within individual marsiyas to the conventional requirements of the particular story. One example will suffice. Abbas, Ali's son and a half-brother of Husain, is the second most important hero of Karbala. (In India, the observances on the 8th of Muharram are particularly identified with him.) In the four-volume edition of the selected works of Anis, we find thirteen marsiyas exclusively about Abbas.<sup>12</sup> In all, certain themes or topics are always present, some exclusive to Abbas, the others required by the conventions of the marsiya. In the first category would come such topoi as Abbas being given the banner by Husain; Abbas receiving an empty water-bag from his favourite niece, Sakina, with the plea to bring her some water;

<sup>12</sup> Mir Babar Ali Anis, *Marāsi-i-Anis*, 4 vols. (Lucknow, n.d.); reprint of the first edition published in 1876.



Abbas fighting his way to the river and filling the bag, but refusing even to moisten his own lips; Abbas' horse following his master by not taking a drink of water; and the martyrdom of Abbas on his way back from the river. The second category would cover the general matters such as *âmad*, *rajaz*, and *jang*. A closer look, however, shows that in the initial *gair-mubkî* sections, Anis finds much scope for variety—that, in this instance at least, is true at places in the other sections too. Consider the contents of the opening *mâjarâ* sections in the thirteen marsiyas on Abbas.

1. '*abbâs-i-‘alî ser-i nayastân-i-najaf hai*, 'Ali's Abbas is the lion of the reed jungle of Najaf.': the birth of Abbas; Abbas' mother gives him into the care of Husain; Abbas tells Ali his devotion to Husain.

2. '*abbâs-i-‘alî yusuf-i-kan‘ân-i-‘alî hai*, 'Ali's Abbas is the Joseph of the Canaan of Ali.': Abbas' love for Husain; Abbas once told his mother the reason for his devotion to Husain, she then told it to Husain; a description of the two tombs in Karbala.

3. '*Yâ rab jahân men bhâ'î se bhâ'î judâ na ho*, 'O Lord, may never a brother be separated from his brother.': the importance of fraternal ties; Husain's sad plight after his elder brother Hasan's death; his relief and joy as his half-brother Abbas grows up.

4. '*Gul âmad-i-abbâs kâ hai fauj-i-sitam men*, 'The hordes of tyranny are in an uproar as Abbas comes.': the soldiers in Yazid's army talk in awe about Abbas; they lose heart thinking of his prowess in battle, and gain some courage following a harangue by their commander.

5. '*abbâs-i-‘alî gauhar-i-darya-i-sqraf hai*, 'Ali's Abbas is a pearl of the ocean of honour.': the poet praises Abbas—Abbas is to Husain what Ali was to the Prophet.

6. '*Jâtâ hai ser-i-bîṣa-i-haidar furât par*, 'The lion of Ali's forest goes to the Euphrates.': Husain expresses grief at the impending death of Abbas.

7. *Jab qasd kiyâ nahr kâ saqqâ-i-haram ne*, 'When the Haram's water-carrier set out for the river.'<sup>13</sup>: Husain tries to stop Abbas, but the latter insists on leaving for the battlefield; Abbas tells Husain how he was instructed by his mother on her death-bed never to forsake Husain.

8. *Ai teg-i-zubân jauhar-i-taqrîr dikhâ de*, 'O sword of my tongue, display your sharpness of speech.': a description of the 10th day of Muharram; after Qasim's death, Abbas grieves over the delay in his own martyrdom; Husain's son Ali Akbar gets ready to join battle, but Abbas complains to Husain and insists on going first.

9. *Âmad hai karbalâ ke nayastân men ser kî*, 'Now comes the lion into the reed jungle of Karbala.': Abbas is on the battlefield; Shimr, the future killer of Husain, makes a nasty comment; Husain rushes to Abbas and restrains him from killing Shimr; the brothers bid farewell to each other.

10. *Jab ran men sar-buland 'alî kâ 'alam huvâ*, 'When Ali's banner was raised high on the battlefield.': battle drums sound in Yazid's army; the battle begins, and all the companions of the Imam, except for Ali Akbar and Abbas, are killed; Abbas claims precedence; the enemy spies carry the news to their camp.

11. *'abbâs-i-'alî qibla-i-arbâb-i-vafâ hai*, 'Ali's Abbas is the cynosure of the people of fidelity.': the journey to Karbala; on the 10th of Muharram, Husain makes his final plea for peace; Abbas comes on the battlefield; Shimr tries to woo him away from Husain through flattery: Abbas rebukes him, but the mistaken shouts of the Yazidi soldiers cause concern in Husain's camp; Abbas' wife, feeling ashamed, sends out her young son to get the facts.

12. *Jab lâṣa-i-qâsim ko 'alamdâr ne dekhâ*, 'When the Banner-holder saw Qasim's corpse.': Abbas goes to the Imam and indirectly asks his permission to go and fight; Husain asks Abbas' permission for the same purpose; Abbas now asks

<sup>13</sup> Haram, in this context, can have two meanings, the Ka'ba, and Husain's harem.

overtly, and insists on his own going first; the two go to talk to the ladies; Abbas speaks to Zainab and gets her to champion his cause.

13. *Āmad hai jigar-band-i-ṣah-i-qil'a-ṣikan kī*, 'Now arrives the beloved son of the king who knocked down forts.': a spy of Amr tells him of the events in Husain's camp; when Abbas reaches the battlefield, Ibn Sa'd vainly tries to win him over; Shimr's nasty remarks enrage Abbas.

These brief descriptions do not indicate the variety of details in these thirteen *mâjarâ* sections; nor can we indicate here the variations and innovations that Anis has introduced in the *rukṣat* and *jang* sections of these marsiyas. Even a casual reading of these thirteen marsiyas should not leave an impression of repetition and monotony.

One other way Anis and good poets like him reduce the possibility of monotony is by using carefully chosen epithets for the main protagonist of a marsiya, besides the name itself. Take for example the previously analysed marsiya; it is about Husain bin Ali, but in its nearly two hundred stanzas the name Husain is used only thirty-four times. In the rest, Anis uses seventy-two different epithets, repeating only a few more than once. Similar, though to a lesser degree, is also the case with secondary characters. The epithets not only add noticeable variety, they also remind the audience of the various attributes of the heroes of Karbala, and the many legends about them.

There is, however, an other kind of monotony that makes itself felt; it arises out of a lack of vivid individualization of these heroes and heroines. For reasons of faith, the poets must depict the martyrs of Karbala and their women as ideal beings, and nothing less. Not even a suggestion of some fault, for example, can be allowed with reference to Husain and his companions; his opponents, on the other hand, have to be evil incarnate, with no exception. Thus, the protagonists in the marsiyas are all anonymously ideal. Hardly any trait is shown to belong exclusively to one and not the others in the same camp. Even the two persons who do stand out

somewhat—i.e. Zainab and Abbas—do so not because of some special traits, but rather due to the fact that they are shown interacting with a great many more persons than the rest. They stand out because we see them in a great variety of situations, but they do not develop as characters during the process of the poem.

Urdu does not possess a true epic. The closest thing to an epic in spirit are the marsiyas. So far two attempts have been made to bring together several marsiyas by the same poet and form an 'epic' on the martyrs of Karbala. The first, and also more notable, was *Razm-Nâma-i-Anîs* (The Battle Epic of Anis), compiled by Syed Masud Hasan Rizavi.<sup>14</sup> He chose sections from various marsiyas of Anis, restricting himself to three meters, and then linked them together with the barest minimum of his own contribution. As a result, he came up with a long poem in the *musaddas* form, running to more than 1200 stanzas, that begins with the story of the birth of Husain and ends with his death at Karbala. Somewhat fragmentary at the beginning, it still displays the integrity of a single governing vision, which is definable more in terms of religious convictions, perhaps, than literary structures. It has little gaiety—the dominant note remains sombre—but it has powers of exaltation. All in all, it may be said to fulfil the simplest requirements of an epic as laid down by C.M. Bowra. It is 'a narrative of some length;' it deals with 'events which have a certain grandeur and importance and come from a life of action, especially of violent action, such as war;' and it gives its readers 'a special pleasure because its events and persons enhance our belief in the worth of human achievement and in the dignity and nobility of man.'<sup>15</sup> But it is a synthetic work; its

<sup>14</sup> Sayyid Masud Hasan Rizavi, *Razm-Nâma-i-Anîs* (Lucknow, 1957). The other such effort is Syed Sarfaraz Husain Rizavi Khabir, *Razm-Nâma-i-Dabîr* (Lucknow, 1964); it compiles selections from the marsiyas of Mirza Salamat Ali Dabir (1803–1875), the equally famous contemporary of Anis.

<sup>15</sup> Quoted in the article, 'Epic,' in *Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics*, ed. Alex Preminger, et al (Princeton, 1974), p. 246.

canvas is narrow; its characters, though ideal, are flatly drawn and lack in chiaroscuro, and its story is overly burdened with religious zeal and ritual piety, the two particularly removing any ambiguity or complexity concerning motives. Thus, in spite of its substantial length, the long text is neither better nor worse than its parts, the individual marsiyas. Though not quite an epic, it is an impressive enough poem, with numerous powerful passages, and does suggest the possibilities that the genre had but the poets could not fully explore due to its fundamental identification with a particular religious context.<sup>16</sup>

<sup>16</sup> Elsewhere I have argued that the Urdu marsiya cannot be regarded as the true precursor of the modern Urdu *nazm* (a poem on a particular topic in blank, free, or rhymed verse); see C. M. Naim, 'Urdu in the Pre-Modern Period: Synthesis or Particularism?' in *New Quest*, #6 (Feb. 1978), p. 10. The essay is included in C. M. Naim, *Ambiguities of Heritage* (Karachi, 1999; pp. 86–96). For a vigorous, partisan, and quite enjoyable defence of the Urdu marsiya against criticism of any sort, see Ali Abbas Husaini, *Urdū Marsiya* (Lucknow, 1973).

## Homosexual (Pederastic) Love In Pre-Modern Urdu Poetry\*

In an article in *The Journal of Social History*, Randolph Trumbach rather convincingly presents the thesis that 'the European anxiety over homosexual behaviour is a unique cultural trait which cannot be found in the rest of the world.' He believes that 'outside of Europe homosexual behaviour between adult man and adolescent boy was neither stigmatized nor forced into any permanent role.' He further maintains that, since 1800, 'Westerners have carried throughout the world their peculiar opposition to any form of licit and institutionalized homosexual behaviour. They have in some areas destroyed the indigenous forms and in others have led the members of the elite influenced by Western thought to question or to become ashamed of their traditional forms.'<sup>1</sup>

Most authors, like Trumbach, tend to oppose the negative valuation of homosexuality in the West with what they see as a positive one in the East, particularly in the Islamicate societies. It would be more correct, however, to posit for the latter an in-between state of *indifference* which, given sufficient impetus in either direction, turn into either salaciousness or harsh disapproval. In other words, if the European response to homosexual love has been totally antagonistic, the Islamicate East has neither celebrated it in any unequivocal fashion, nor

\* Revised. Originally appeared in *Studies in the Urdu Gazal and Prose Fiction*, ed. Muhammad Umar Memon (Madison, 1979), pp. 120–142.

<sup>1</sup> Randolph Trumbach, 'London's Sodomites: Homosexual Behaviour and Western Culture in the 18th Century,' in *Journal of Social History*, 11:1 (Fall 1977), pp. 1, 9, 24.

looked at it with total impassivity. Samuel Z. Klausner's phrase, 'tolerant jocularly,'<sup>2</sup> perhaps comes closest to describing the latter's response, but only at one end of the scale; at the other end, religious condemnation always remained a serious threat. The following discussion of the treatment of pederastic love [*amrad-parastī*] in Urdu poetry provides support to the conclusions put forth by Trumbach, but aims to bring out in clearer detail the actual range of responses in one Islamicate society.

Urdu, as the primary language of high culture for the vast majority of South Asian Muslims for at least three centuries, shares a great deal with the two dominant languages of Islamic civilization, Arabic and Persian. In Islamicate societies, poetry's symbolic language has always been the more appropriate or safe medium to express controversial, even blasphemous, ideas. That is true for Urdu too. The theme of homosexual love was not treated in Urdu prose until the middle of the 20th century,<sup>3</sup> but what couldn't be said in prose in the preceding three hundred years was always licit in poetry. The following discussion examines the modes and attitudes found in the Urdu ghazal of the pre-modern—i.e. pre-1857—period, then elucidates them further by bringing in for comparison the ideas of the so-called Uranian poets of nineteenth century England.

As is well-known, the Urdu ghazal began in the Deccan in the seventeenth century inspired by the Persian ghazal, but with a uniquely indigenous naturalness about it. Avoiding the ambiguous *ghazal-i- muzakkar* of Persian—the lyric in which a male lover seemingly addressed another male—the Urdu poets of the Deccan, in addition, not only wrote ghazals in which a

<sup>2</sup> 'Sex Life in Islam,' in *The Encyclopedia of Sexual Behaviour* (New York, 1961), Vol. 1, p. 547.

<sup>3</sup> Only four such stories come to mind, Ismat Chughtai's '*Lihāf*' (The Quilt), Sa'adat Hasan Manto's '*Dhu'ān*' (Smoke), Krishna Chandra's '*Īrānī Pulāo*' (Iranian Pulao), and Muhammad Hasan Askari's '*Phislan*' (Slipperiness). Tellingly, the first two caused trouble to the authors in the colonial (Judeo-Christian inspired?) legal system.

male addressed a grammatically-gendered female, but also adopted the Indian tradition of having a female address a male. The Islamicate kingdoms of the Deccan were destroyed by the Mughal armies by the end of the seventeenth century; the centre of Urdu culture and poetry then shifted northward, much closer to Turkish and Iranian influences—first to Aurangabad, and then to Delhi. The practice of using a female voice was gradually dropped in the ghazal itself, and was reserved exclusively for quasi-pornographic verses describing lesbian, as well as heterosexual, affairs.<sup>4</sup> The practice of using a female grammatical gender with reference to the beloved was discontinued. Instead, at Delhi, the conventions of the *ghazal-i-muzakkar* became exclusively dominant. Now, grammatically, the beloved in the ghazal was always masculine, as was the lover. The practice continued in Lucknow, where heterosexual eroticism was relatively more frequent and explicit, resulting in a kind of fossilized conventionality; later, it was denounced by the reformer critics of the late nineteenth century, and explained away by still later apologists.

When we look at the pre-modern Urdu ghazal, particularly that of the earliest poets of Delhi and Lucknow, the following features immediately draw our attention.

All grammatical references to the beloved are in the masculine. Even when an obviously feminine attribute of the body or dress is mentioned, the verb form shows a masculine gender.

Many a verse contains a reference to an exclusively masculine attribute, namely the down [*sabza* or *kat*] on the cheeks of pubescent boys.

A large number of verses refer to certain 'exclusively, or predominantly, 'masculine' items of dress or accoutrement, such as turbans, caps, swords, and daggers.

References occur to some social context or character trait, which, in the context of that particular society, was considered chiefly to belong to the male domain. For exam-

<sup>4</sup> See the article on Rekhti in this book.



ple, the beloved might be depicted as wandering in the market, sitting in the company of men, or acting bloodthirsty.

In many verses, particularly by some of the earliest Delhi poets, there occur quite unambiguous references to young boys, using such terms as *laundâ* (lad), *larkâ* (boy), *baçca* (child), and *pisar* (son). A smaller number of verses contain even the names—real or fictitious—of individual boys. Overwhelmingly, however, the beloved remains anonymous.

For almost one hundred years after 1857, the developments in Urdu literature remained intimately tied with the changes occurring in the social, political, and educational life of the Muslims of India. During that time, most of the major contributors to Urdu literature were actively involved in various reformist movements within the Indo-Muslim society, their basic concern being what they called the 'backwardness'—educational, political, social and economic—of the Indian Muslims. (They were, in fact, concerned only with the upper and middle classes of the people.) As a result, there developed an overarching tendency to justify literature in terms of its social usefulness, which, in turn, led to the creation of a habit of either condemning, or explaining away much in the Urdu literary heritage.<sup>5</sup> That was especially the case concerning the evidence for homosexual love in the pre-modern Urdu ghazal. We need not concern ourselves with the wrath of the moralists—it is all too familiar—but a look at the arguments put forth by the apologists would be instructive.

The first explanation the apologists offered was that the use of a masculine gender was simply a grammatical necessity—it is the form required by Urdu grammar for all universal, non-specific statements.

<sup>5</sup> The first, and most far-reaching critique, of Urdu poetry on moral grounds was made by Altaf Husain Hali in his *Muqaddama-i-Şi'r-o-Şâ'irî* (1893). For a comprehensive discussion, see Frances W. Pritchett, *Nets of Awareness: Urdu Poetry and its Critics* (Berkeley, 1994). The most fervent, and morally impeccable, defence of Urdu poetic traditions was made by Masud Hasan Rizavi in his *Hamârî Şâ'irî* (Lucknow, 1928).

That grammar-bound universality, they next argued, lent itself to keeping the beloved anonymous—the society's cherished sense of propriety demanded that women shouldn't be mentioned in public statements. A male grammatical gender was employed to protect the honour of the beloved, who was actually a female.

Conventionally, the beloved in the ghazal could possibly be (i) the *ma'būd* (lit., the one who is worshipped), i.e. God; (ii) the *mamdūh* (lit., the one who is praised), i.e. the patron; or (iii) the *mahbūb* (lit., the one who is loved), i.e., the beloved. The more common practice, however, has been to observe only a binary reference—*ma'sūq-i-haqīqī* (lit., the true beloved), i.e. the Divine Beloved, and *ma'sūq-i-majāzī* (lit., the metaphorical beloved), i.e. the Earthly object of love—the latter could be taken as either a young boy or a young woman. Consequently, the apologists contended, the use of a masculine imagery was absolutely necessary to create—and sustain—that crucial two-fold referential aspect of the ghazal. They claimed that almost every 'true' ghazal verse could be interpreted as simultaneously referring to the 'metaphorical' [*majāzī*] love and the 'real' [*haqīqī*] Love.<sup>6</sup>

There were two Sufi beliefs that authorised this claim. Firstly, all earthly phenomena reflect the beauty of the Divine Beloved and therefore when a Sufi looks at an attractive face, be it of a young boy, he sees in it only the beauty of God's own 'Face.' Relevant here were a few apocryphal

<sup>6</sup> Ghalib (d. 1869) chiding Qadr Bilgiri for not maintaining the desired reference, wrote, 'The earthly beloved [*ma'sūq-i-majāzī*] may be addressed in the second person both by singular *tū* and the plural *tum*, whereas God is addressed either in the second person singular, *tū*, or in the third person plural, *vo*, the latter implying *qazā-va-qadr* (the judged and measured decrees of God, or Fate). In your ghazal you have sometimes used the rhyme verb *dete ho* in a manner that does not allow any reference to the earthly beloved [He then quotes a Qadr couplet that contains, 'You bring us into the world'; then adds.] Tell me, who are you addressing? Except for Fate, no woman [*randī*] or boy [*laundā*] can be said here to be the addressee.' Malik Ram (Ed.). *Kutūb-i Ghalib* (Aligarh. 1962). p. 262.

Hadith too, for they refer to the Prophet's alleged vision of a handsome male; many Sufistic writers used them to support their own contentions. The Mughal prince Dara Shikoh (d. 1659), for example, quotes with full confidence one such apocryphal Hadith in his Sufi treatise, *Sakīnat-al-Auliya*. Arguing that when 'the Attributes-less' descends to the level of 'Attributes,' [He] can be seen exclusively by prophets and saints, 'as is evident,' Dara Shikoh writes, 'from the Hadith, "I saw my Lord in the most beautiful form of a youth, who was beardless and had ringlets."'"<sup>7</sup>

Secondly, at the beginning of his spiritual quest, a Sufi seeker should first direct all his love towards his mentor [*mur-sīd*], who could only be a male. Only later could the disciple, through the help of the mentor, hope to reach his true goal, God—who again must always be referred to in the masculine.<sup>8</sup>

The above explanations, insisting that the interpretation of most, if not all ghazal verses, must be either heterosexual or mystical, were put forward to refute the simpler conclusions one might have drawn from the first three features listed in our previous list—a masculine grammatical gender, masculine physical attributes, and masculine items of dress and accoutrement. With reference to the fourth feature—a male social context—the apologists offered that the beloved of the ghazal was a courtesan. She moved freely among men, was seen in public gatherings, had countless admirers, and by nature and profession she was fickle as well as ruthless. That she was not

<sup>7</sup> Dara Shikoh, *Sakīnat-al-Auliya*, trans. Maqbul Beg Badakhshani (Lahore, 1971), p. 94. The alleged Hadith is not found in any authoritative collection.

<sup>8</sup> Hazrat Nizamuddin Auliya of Delhi (d. 1325), is recorded saying, 'Whenever I attended a *samā*' gathering and listened to the verses being sung—and I swear by my Shaikh's robes—I always took them to refer to the most excellent attributes of my Shaikh. Once I heard a man recite, "Don't walk so elegantly, lest you suffer someone's evil eye." I was instantly reminded of the utmost perfection of my Master's sublime character, and my heart caught fire.' Amir Hasan Ala Sizji, *Favā'id-al-Favād*, ed. Muhammad Latif Malik (Lahore, 1966), p. 166.

referred to in the feminine was again an extension of the social convention concerning modesty and propriety!

As to the verses containing explicit references to handsome boys, they were generally ignored, or the writers were designated unimportant. An interesting case in that regard was that of Mir Taqi Mir (d. 1810), consistently mentioned as the greatest of Urdu ghazal poets. Some critics have written about the protocol [*adab*] of love as depicted in Mir's verse, while many have reconstructed Mir's ill-fated love—allegedly for a female cousin—on the basis of selected verses and some ambiguous autobiographical material. Few, however, much mention the many verses of Mir which contain references to boys, even after Andalib Shadani culled such verses together in a notorious essay published decades ago.<sup>9</sup>

Mir's fondness for this particular theme becomes apparent when we compare his ghazals with the ghazals of four of his five most important contemporaries, Hatam (d. 1781), Sauda (d. 1780), Qa'im (d. 1793), and Abru (d. 1733). In the case of the former three, we find very few verses containing unambiguous pederastic references. The only exception being the theme of *kat* (down on the cheeks), which is indeed found noticeably, though in almost all instances merely as a convention necessitated rhyme. Abru's verse, on the other hand, is full of pederastic references, and displays, only in this regard, much similarity with Mir's poetry. No wonder, therefore, that their contemporary Qa'im, in his *tazkira* (literary biography) called Abru a *husn-parast* (lit., a worshipper of beauty) and described Mir as *ṣam'-i-anjuman-i-'iṣq-bâzân* (lit., a candle lit in the gathering of love practitioners). The two terms, contextually, strongly imply some homosexual proclivity on the part of the two poets.<sup>10</sup> Abru, actually, was quite outspoken in one verse.

<sup>9</sup> Andalib Shadani, 'Mir Sâhib kâ ek Kâs Rang,' in *Tahqîqât* (Bareilly, n.d.), pp. 135–80.

<sup>10</sup> Muhammad Qiyamuddin Qa'im, *Maḡzan-i-Nikât*, ed. Abdul Haq (Aurangabad, 1929), pp. 14, 40. Mir, in his own *tazkira*, calls Qa'im a *husn-*

*He who avoids boys, and desires women,  
Is not a lover, but a man of lust.*<sup>11</sup>

In Abru's case, not much is known about his life except that he was from the family of a sufi saint. His verse, however, displays a marked aversion to conjugal life and women, and shows a pronounced fondness for boys. Mir, on the other hand, married twice and had children; he also left us a great deal of autobiographical material, including some tangential evidence for heterosexual attachments, but nothing that could unequivocally confirm the predilection in many of his verses.<sup>12</sup>

Similarly, in the literary biographies [*tazkirât*] written by some of the poets themselves, we find certain poets described as being '*âsiq-peša* (lit., lover by profession) or *husn-parast*, while others might be mentioned as being extremely handsome, and desired by all and sundry. An example of the latter would be the case of Abdul Ha'i Taban, whom Mir in his *tazkira* calls *naujavân-bâ-mazâ* (lit., a delectable youth) and *ma'sûq-i-âsiq-mizâj* (lit., a beloved with the temperament of a lover).<sup>13</sup> Taban himself is reported to have been in love with another young poet named Sulaiman, who equally returned his devotion, and who, according to Qa'im, turned ascetic after Taban's early death.<sup>14</sup>

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*parast*. See Mir Taqi Mir, *Nikât-al-Su'arâ*, ed. Abdul Haq (Aurangabad, 1935), p. 122. The selective use of these epithets implies some specificity, and supports my contention.

<sup>11</sup> '*jo laundâ chor kar randî kon câhe // vo koi 'âsiq nahîn hai bul-havas hai.*' Najmuddin Mubarak Abru, *Divân-i-Âbrû*, ed. Muhammad Hasan (New Delhi, 1990), p. 283.

<sup>12</sup> For a detailed discussion, see C. M. Naim, *Zikr-i Mir: The Autobiography of the Eighteenth Century Mughal Poet: Mir Muhammad Taqi 'Mir'* (New Delhi, 1999), pp. 193–203.

<sup>13</sup> Mir, *Nikât*, p. 108.

<sup>14</sup> Qa'im, *Maḳzan*, p. 67.

There is also a remarkable *masnavî* by Abru.<sup>15</sup> In this untitled poem of some two hundred and fifty rhymed couplets, Abru lays down the ways a boy should dress and behave in order to entice lovers. The poet encounters a young boy in a Delhi street; the boy, attractive in looks, is slovenly in dress and manners, thus showing, according to Abru, a sad lack of awareness of his own charms. Abru, therefore, engages him in a conversation and, finding him eager to learn, instructs him in great detail in the ways of a beloved [*ma'şûq*]. The following is merely a summary of Abru's instructions.

The boy should keep his hair long, parted in the middle, combed and braided, and properly oiled. The forehead, however, should be left exposed, and kept free of loose hair.

He should carefully look after his skin, and avoid excessive sun. He should apply to his face at night an ointment made of lemon juice, saffron and jasmine oil, washing it off in the morning. The boy should whiten his teeth, but darken his gums with *missî*, while his lips should be red with betel juice. A line of collyrium should be laid in his eyes and red marks of henna on his finger knuckles—though not on his palms.

The boy should dress elegantly, and also adorn himself with ornaments. Abru gives details of the desired items of jewellery, clothes, turbans, caps, and shoes. He asks the boy to use perfume, and frequently use a handkerchief to wipe his face.

The boy should be coy and playful, a bit flirtatious even, but not overly so. At moments he should be considerate, and at other times neglectful. He should learn to use his eyes, for the eyes can express in a thousand ways.

A *ma'şûq* (beloved) should have a sense of dignity. He shouldn't be too proud, but without some degree of haughtiness, he cannot be a *ma'şûq*. A *ma'şûq* is like a king; the lovers are his courtiers. Each lover should be given a distinct

<sup>15</sup> Abru. *Divân*, pp. 298–308. See 'Abru: Advice to a Beloved,' translated by Saleem Kidwai, versified by Ruth Vanita, in *Same-Sex Love in India: Readings from Literature and History*, ed. Ruth Vanita and Saleem Kidwai (New York, 2000), pp. 161–168.

status and function, reflecting his inherent nature, and then accorded commensurate treatment. The 'king' should see to it that his 'courtiers' don't cause harm to each other.

The boy should never drink in the company of lowly people. Nor should he seek monetary reward from anyone. He should never ask; the lovers will give him everything on their own. What lies in the boy's fate will reach him regardless.

When down should first appear on his cheeks, the boy shouldn't shave, for now has arrived beauty's 'spring.' So long as the beard remains soft, the boy should continue as before, but when it toughens, he should shave both mornings and evenings. Finally, when his bloom is gone and his lovers start losing interest in him, the boy should abandon the ways of a *ma'sûq*, be humble and friendly with everyone, and seek to mix with other handsome youths.

In this poem, as also elsewhere, Abru expresses no carnal feelings. In fact, he makes a point of condemning homosexual lust, much the same way he condemns the heterosexual.

Apart from the literary evidence, we also have few contemporary accounts that indicate that pederastic relationships were fairly common, and accepted as a matter of fact, in the eighteenth century Delhi. They were not frowned upon or publicly condemned. A significant source of that kind is the brief memoir of Dargah Quli Khan's, a nobleman who came north from the Deccan, and stayed in Delhi for three years (1738–1741). Khan finds pederastic love very common in Delhi, and gives the names of a few of the more notable boys [*amrad*] and lovers [*amrad-pasand*] of that time. About Mirza Manno, a young noble, he writes, 'His adeptness in entrapping the beautiful ones is magic. Young noblemen learn the finer points of this art from him, and take pride in being his pupils. He is the organizer of this gathering of cherubs [*gilmân*] at [the mansion of Azam Khan, an older *amrad-pasand* noble]. A beautiful boy not attached to this assembly is out in the dark, and a boy not included in these gatherings cannot be considered beautiful.' He also describes a professional *amrad* (a beardless youth)—'Miyan Hinga Amrad has a

fair complexion and wears pale-yellow garments. He presents his dance performances in front of the Red Fort every evening. Senior and reputable people come to see him, pretending they were going to the Chandni Chowk. . . . He is extremely handsome . . . and earns a lot of money by selling himself, but he never goes to anyone's house. His lovers and buyers come themselves to his place.'<sup>16</sup>

Further insight in the homosexual (pederastic) love in pre-modern Urdu poetry, and in the ethos of the poets themselves, may be gained by bringing in for comparison, the poetry and ideals of the so-called Uranian poets of English who celebrated pederastic love between 1890 and 1930.<sup>17</sup> It may make us better aware of the wide range of ways people have responded over time to this love, and how society's stigmatisation—or lack of it—could produce different responses, excuses, and explanations.

The term 'Uranian,' according to Timothy d'Arch Smith, was derived from *Urning*, a term coined by Karl Heinrich Ulrichs, a pamphleteer in Germany between 1864 and 1870 defending the 'naturalness' of homosexual love. Ulrichs sought 'to establish a theory of sexual inversion upon the basis of natural science, proving that abnormal instincts are inborn and healthy in a considerable percentage of human beings; that they do not owe their origin to bad habits of any kind, to hereditary disease or to wilful depravity; that they are incapable in the majority of cases of being extirpated or converted into normal channels; and that the men subject to them are neither physically, intellectually, nor morally inferior to normally constituted individuals.'<sup>18</sup>

<sup>16</sup> Dargah Quli Khan, *Muraqqa'-i-Dihli*, ed. Khaliq Anjum (New Delhi, 1993), pp. 69–70 and p. 102, respectively.

<sup>17</sup> Timothy d'Arch Smith, *Love in Earnest: Some Notes on the Lives and writings of English 'Uranian' Poets from 1889 to 1930* (London, 1970). The poets included are Edwin Bradford, Ralph Chubb, Samuel Cottam, Edmund John, John Nicholson and John Stuart-Young.

<sup>18</sup> Smith, *Love*, pp. 225–6. A summary of Ulrichs' views may be found in Appendix B to Havelock Ellis, *Studies in Psychology of Sex: Sexual Inver-*



Near the end of his book, Smith mentions several themes that distinguish the poetry of the Uranians from the more common poetry of heterosexual love.

One dominant theme for the Uranian poets is the fleeting time of boyhood. 'It was all too clear to the Uranians that their adoration for an ungrown creature was perforce the swiftest of nature's romances, prone to suffer from the boy's psychic and somatic changes as he grew towards maturity.'<sup>19</sup> The Uranians lament the growth of hair on the boy's face and limbs, and that he would soon be wearing trousers instead of shorts. They dread the day when he would eventually fall in love with a girl. Such realistic fears do not haunt the Urdu poets, neither in the ghazal, where literalism is in any case not preferred, nor in other genres. The cheeks of the boy in the ghazal get covered with a fuzzy growth, but a conventional pun allows Urdu poets to view it as the herald of Youth's 'spring,' and not necessarily his 'autumn.'<sup>20</sup> As for the possibility of the beloved's himself falling in love, it is considered out of the question in the classical ghazal—the convention does not allow it. It, however, is an essential possible event in a minor genre called *vāsoḳī*, where the poet adopts a peevish pose, and prays for his beloved to fall in love with some cruel person and thus suffer like him.

While the Uranians often express jealousy towards women, considering them their rivals, Urdu poets do not. Even Abru's contempt for women is not tinged with jealousy; it is in fact more in line with the attitude of certain Sufis who abhorred conjugal relations because the latter perforce contained some carnality.<sup>21</sup>

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*sion* (Philadelphia, 1904), pp. 225–239. The appendix, signed 'Z,' was probably written by John Addington Symonds, according to Smith, a precursor of the Uranians.

<sup>19</sup> Smith, *Love*, p. 163.

<sup>20</sup> In Persian and Urdu poetry, the faint down is often referred to as *sabza-i-ḳat*, lit., the beard's verdure, an allusion to spring's burst of greenery.

<sup>21</sup> For example, the strong negative remarks of al-Hujwiri (d. 1063). See R. A. Nicholson, *Kashf-Al-Mahjub of Al Hujwiri* (London, 1936, 2nd edition),

Another favourite theme of the Uranians is a sense of their own guilt; they remain acutely conscious of the stigma that society and religion attached to their particular erotic feelings. 'Often, the uselessness, the frustration, even the immorality of their passions, are spoken of by the Uranians. A boy is damned for his beauty, the poet self-castigated for yielding to his charms.'<sup>22</sup> That seems not to be the case with the pre-modern Urdu poets. The Indo-Muslim milieu was neither actively sex-positive, as the ancient Greek is supposed to have been, nor was it blatantly sex-negative, as seems to be the attitude of the Judeo-Christian England. It was mostly indifferent, instead, in matters related to sexual tastes and habits, but willing to show tolerance in that regard if so required.

The indifference came from both components of the Indo-Muslim milieu. No pre-modern Hindu-dominated literature of India depicts much homosexual love—the Muslim-dominated Persian and Urdu being significantly different in that regard. Textual evidence of another kind, however, suggests that homosexual erotics were not unknown among the Hindus, and that the response there, too, was indifference. In his famous treatise, *Kama Sutra*, Vatsyayana describes, without a trace of disapprobation, two types of eunuchs—one dressed as males, the other as females—with whom men engaged in oral sex.<sup>23</sup> Similarly, in the fifth century *Laws of Manu*, we find that 'a twice-born man who commits an unnatural offence with a

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p. 364. Also, Annemarie Schimmel, *Mystical Dimensions of Islam* (Chapel Hill, 1975), pp. 426–35.

<sup>22</sup> Smith, *Love*, p. 166

<sup>23</sup> *The Kamasutra of Vatsyayana*, trans. Richard Burton and F. F. Arbuthnot, ed. W. G. Archer (London, 1963) pp. 116–9. Vatsyayana refers only to oral sex. In the pre-modern Islamic literatures of the Middle East and Central Asia, male homosexual act was anal, with the strong hierarchy of 'top' and 'bottom.' See Charles Wendel, 'The Denizens of Paradise,' in *Humaniora Islamica*, II, 1974, pp. 29–59. Also, the discussion of the hierarchy's psycho-social ramifications in Iran in Reza Baraheni, *The Crowned Cannibals* (New York, 1977), p. 45 ff.

male . . . shall bathe, dressed in his clothes'<sup>24</sup>—a minor offence. On the Muslim side, too, things are not drastically different. The Qur'an contains only two verses, 4:15 and 4:16, that are understood as referring to homosexual acts, but there too the language is mild compared to what the Qur'an says about heterosexual fornication or adultery. Concerning women, 'If any of your women/ are guilty of lewdness,/ Take the evidence of four/ (Reliable) witnesses from amongst you/ Against them; and if they testify,/ Confine them to houses until/ Death do claim them,/ Or God ordain for them/ Some (other) way (4:15).' Concerning men, 'If two men among you are guilty of lewdness, punish them both. If they repent and amend, leave them alone; for God is Oft-returning, Most Merciful (4:16).'<sup>25</sup> Ignoring the telling difference between the two punishments, what is noteworthy here is that both are far milder than in the case of adultery, where each partner is to be precisely flogged. 'The woman and the man guilty of adultery or fornication,—flog each of them with a hundred stripes: let not compassion move you in their case, in a manner prescribed by God, if ye believe in God and the Last Day: and let a party of the Believers witness their punishment (24:2).' The specificity of the punishment, public witnessing, the total lack of allowance for compassion and repentance, in one case, and the exact opposite in the other, clearly suggests that preserving the stability of crucial social contracts and constructs—marriage; paternity; inheritance; honour—is of far greater concern than just punishing what is considered a lewd or sinful act. Muslim religious scholars usually refer to 4:15, then proceed—like the Judeo-Christians in their own way—to employ the Qur'anic references to Lot, Sodom and Gommorrah, and a number of Hadith to bolster their unequivocal con-

<sup>24</sup> *The Laws of Manu*, chapter XI, verse 175. See *The Laws of Manu*, trans. Georg Bühler (New York, 1969), p. 466.

<sup>25</sup> *The Holy Qur-an: Text, Translation and Commentary*, Vol. I, trans. Abdullah Yusuf Ali (New York, 1946), p. 183. Ali convincingly argues that 4:15 deals with homosexual relationships, but then explains away the difference in punishments (notes 523 and 525) not that convincingly.

demnations of homosexuality.<sup>26</sup> Arabic and Persian literary sources, however, are not altogether blasé on the subject. They often offer a curious apologia, as explained by Adam Mez, 'The real pederasty, according to Muslim tradition, came from Khorasan with the Abbasid army. (Jahiz, d. 255/868, explains this in his "*Book of the Schoolmaster*," by the fact that Abu Muslim forbade his army, for the first time, to have anything to do with women.)'<sup>27</sup> The same sources, nevertheless, blithely indicate that homosexual acts and relationships were quite prevalent in urban and court milieus, and didn't cause the indiscreet either social disgrace or politico-economic inconvenience.<sup>28</sup>

Thus, in terms of both its components, the pre-modern Indo-Muslim milieu was clearly not negative toward homosexual preferences. That is why, in that society, homosexuality never developed into 'a way of life,' or led to the adoption by homosexuals of a minority status and the stigma that went with it—as happened in the Judeo-Christian England.

Returning to Urdu poets, they, on the whole, neither celebrate homosexual love, nor do they denigrate it, to the exclusion of other passions. They seem to accept it as one outlet for erotic feelings. They certainly do not feel stigmatized.

A most curious favourite of the Uranians is the theme of 'peeping.' 'Very often, all the Uranian lover could hope for was to be able to be near boys, to teach them, to watch them playing games and, most delightful of all, to see them stripped

<sup>26</sup> For example, Mufti Muhammad Zafeeruddin of the Deoband seminary. In his book, *Nasl-kusī* (Deoband, 1972, 2nd edition, revised)—the title means 'Genocide'—he refers only to 4:16, bringing in his support Shah Waliullah, then builds his case with the Qur'anic verses that deal with the Lot story.

<sup>27</sup> Adam Mez, *The Renaissance of Islam*, trans. S. Khuda Bakhsh and D. S. Margoliouth (Patna, 1937), p. 358.

<sup>28</sup> See George Allgrove, *Love in the East* (London, 1962), pp. 66–76; also Richard Burton's 'Terminal Essay' to his *Book of the Thousand Nights and a Night*, reproduced in *Homosexuality: A Cross Cultural Approach*, ed. Donald Webster Cory (New York, 1956), pp. 207–46.

for swimming. Untouchable, the boys may yet inspire passion through the poet's eyes alone.'<sup>29</sup> Arousal of passion through sight is, of course, not unknown in the Urdu ghazal; in fact, that is mostly what the ghazal lover— his beloved being so remote and neglectful—can hope for. The sexually segregated urban society of the eighteenth century Delhi provided a great many occasions for men to come together and cultivate intimacy without any fear of being stigmatised. The opportunities, as mentioned in other poetic genres, occurred in the contexts of tutoring, wrestling, games, fairs, and private conviviality. In his autobiographical[?] *masnavî*, *Bostân-i-Kayâl* (1747), Siraj of Aurangabad describes his passion for a Hindu boy, who was fourteen when they first met. Siraj came upon him in the market and was smitten by his beauty at first sight. He invited the boy to come to him with his books for instruction. The boy was more than willing, and their relationship soon became most intense. What should be noted is that when the news of the passionate attachment spread in the city and people raised objections, it was not because the relationship was between an older man and a boy, but between a Muslim and a Hindu.<sup>30</sup>

As for the act of 'peeping' itself, we do find references to it, but the act, interestingly, is imagined as common to both the lover and the beloved. Ghalib (d. 1869), for example, in his *Masnavî-i Abr-i Guharbâr*, denigrates the promised Paradise on the ground that it would not provide 'a hole in the wall' for peeping at beautiful people. While his contemporary, Zauq, (d. 1854) bemoans that 'the hole through which my love used to peep at me, // it alone is now blocked by the nest of a wasp.'<sup>31</sup>

The Uranian poets often recall poignantly 'their own lost youth when, without fear or guilt, possessed of the same

<sup>29</sup> Smith, *Love*, p. 169.

<sup>30</sup> Sirajuddin Siraj Aurangabadi, *Masnavî-i-Bostân-i-Kayâl*, ed. Abdul Qadir Sarvari (Hyderabad, 1969), pp. 69–70.

physical frame they now so much adore, they might openly have had boy-friends with whom they could exchange . . . sweet caresses of budding sexuality, without the hampering burden of a mature or aging body.’<sup>32</sup> Such nostalgia for a lost masculine youth does not find expression in any genre of Urdu poetry, and for a significant reason. The key word above is ‘exchange’; it suggests mutual dependence and, most importantly, a lack of concern with role inversion. A truly sex-positive attitude does not differentiate between a ‘subject’ and an ‘object’ in the act of love. The Indo-Muslim society, however, insistently made that distinction at the time, and still does. No doubt, it did not frown upon homosexuality as such, but it did stigmatize ‘passivity’ in males. One can say that the adoring lover-poets of Urdu were basically ‘macho’ males. That is why even their homosexual love was essentially pederastic, and not the kind that exists between two males of equal age and experience . Even now, in Urdu/Hindi India, *launde-bâz* (pederast; lit., boy-player) is not as exclusively an emphatic term of abuse as is *gāndû* (catamite, lit., anus-defined). The same is reported for contemporary Iran, another Islamicate society. ‘The homosexual act in Iran is a transaction in which there is a victim and victor. The subject-victor emasculates the object-victim. From then on, the victim will be a second-class citizen in the eyes of other men which means that they will consider him to be only a half-man, i.e. a woman. Such a man in Tabriz would be called by the name of his anus; even his name becomes a hole in his bottom. They say: “That boy is an asshole.”’<sup>33</sup>

The ideal boy that the Uranians fantasized about—their ‘angelic vision’—did not exist in real life. The real boy, ‘grubby, insolent, uncomprehending of Uranian passion and rebuffing its smallest manifestation, was a far cry from their

<sup>31</sup> Ghalib: *nazar-bâzi-o-zauq-i-didâr kû // ba-firdaus rauzan ba-divâr kû. Zauq: jhāṅkte the vo hamēṅ jis rauzan-i-divâr se // vā’e qismat ho usī rauzan meṅ ghar zambūr kâ.*

<sup>32</sup> Smith, *Love*, 172–3.

<sup>33</sup> Baraheni, *Crowned*, p. 60.

Ideal Comrade.’<sup>34</sup> They could find their ideal boy only in dreams and visions, which became too frequent a theme with them. In these visions the boy even takes on a kind of seraphic quality—sweet and gentle and loving. In his physical attributes, the beloved of the pre-modern Urdu ghazal is no less idealized, but in the qualities of the spirit he is markedly different. He is cruel, neglectful, and wanton. He takes pleasure in hurting his lovers; he makes their blood run in the streets. It appears to me that the ‘rough trade’ image presented of both the male and the female beloved in the pre-modern Urdu ghazal was a compensatory device to assign ‘male’—culturally the more desirable—qualities to those whom the poets loved, but who actually, in the eyes of their society, could not possibly possess those cherished attributes. In this manner, the poet could make his love for a ‘weak’ person more understandable to himself, and his own grovelling attitude more acceptable to his society, since a man could be submissive and humble, without feeling the society’s contempt, only before another man. Andaleeb Shadani offers a different explanation for the ghazal beloved’s ‘blood thirst’. That, he asserts, was due to a ‘real’ reason, namely that the beloved was a young boy, who could not possibly have any reason to find an older man attractive as a lover, and who, more likely, would reject the advances fiercely. Naturally, Shadani argues, the love in the [pre-modern] ghazal was never mutual; it was always one-sided, and often ended in gruesome tragedy for the older lover.<sup>35</sup>

The next feature Smith draws our attention to is the Uranian’s assertion of the ‘supremacy’ of their kind of love. The Uranians, he writes, ‘argued that their love was altogether of a higher order than heterosexual relationships and that the manly concept of true male comradeship knitted stronger bonds than any marriage-tie.’<sup>36</sup> Among Urdu poets, only Abru

<sup>34</sup> Smith, *Love*, p. 174.

<sup>35</sup> Shadani. *Tahqīqāt*. pp. 225–66.

<sup>36</sup> Smith, *Love*, p. 175.

expresses some contempt for heterosexual relationships. His reasoning has two parts. Heterosexual love always implies carnality, and can become conjugal; homosexual love, on the other hand, cannot become conjugal, and it need not always be carnal. Abru's abhorrence of carnality would make his idealized homosexual love seem close to the Platonic ideal, except that it does not lead to true male comradeship. Certainly, in his above mentioned *masnavi*, Abru is no Socrates to his Alcebiades of a boy. That aside, it is not that the Urdu ghazal does not idealize the emotion of love itself, independent of anything or anybody contingent—that, indeed, is foundational to it. Mir's poetry, for one, is a *tour de force* of that idealization, as is also Dard's.<sup>37</sup> Both Mir and Dard extol the human instinct of love and its ennobling effect, but then they are rightly seen as expressing important Sufi sentiments that permeate the best of all ghazal poetry in the pre-modern period.

Though Sufi poetry never extols 'true male comradeship,' Sufi lore is replete with accounts of profound and lasting relationships between pairs of men—the most famous between Jalaluddin Rumi and Shams of Tabriz. But, as compared to the ties the Uranian's aspire for, these relationships come with a significant role-reversal—it is, for example, the lover, Rumi, who is ennobled in the progress of his love, and not Shams, his beloved. Shams is not only supremely noble already, he is the only ennobler in the relationship.

Given the pressures of their society, Smith next submits, the Uranians had to devise 'methods of expression which would, at one and the same time, give no cause for shocking the reading public and impress, by their undertones, the already initiated.'<sup>38</sup> Towards that end they employed in their verse classical legends, and translated poems from Greek and Latin,

<sup>37</sup> The best source in English on Mir is Ralph Russell and K. Islam, *Three Mughal Poets* (Cambridge, 1968); and for Dard, Annemarie Schimmel, *Pain and Grace* (Leiden, 1976).

<sup>38</sup> Smith, *Love*, p. 180.



as also from other languages, including Persian. Most daringly, they scoured the pages of the Bible and appropriated certain Christian doctrines and legends to their own purposes. Many of them, in their own light, were devout Christians, and found sympathy and opportunity in some of the autocephalous churches of that time. The Urdu poets had their own Indo-Muslim milieu, and its dominant values were derived from Arabic and Persian literary, courtly and mystical traditions. The latter provided enough covers, if any was ever needed. The Urdu poets could always fight back any detractor by declaring, in Mir's words, '*They who worship Form don't know what Meaning is.*'<sup>39</sup>

A most curious motif that occurs, according to Smith, only too frequently in the Uranian verse is 'the extraordinary longing for an attachment to a boy either of a far higher or, more often, of a far lower social rank.'<sup>40</sup> For its explanation, Smith suggests several causes: an inferiority complex and a fear of failure on the part of the poets that hindered their having an affair with an 'intellectual equal;' the alleged sexual uninhibitedness of the lower classes; the ease with which a lower class boy could be discarded if he became too demanding; and, more laudably, a desire 'to rear the boy from his menial environment into better life.' The literary result of that final desire was what Smith calls 'the Uranians' myth-making of the "Pauper" into the "Prince," the myth indeed of the boy who, thanks to a man's intervention in his life, overrides and supersedes his lower-class birthright and becomes a boy of great beauty and intellect.'<sup>41</sup> In that regard, the Uranians favoured telegraph boys, street urchins, working lads, and Sicilian peasantry.

<sup>39</sup> *sûrat-parast hote nahîñ ma'ni-âşanâ // hai 'isq se buton-ke merâ mudda'â kugh aur*, 'Form-worshippers don't know what Meaning is. // That I love idols has a very different purpose.'

<sup>40</sup> Smith, *Love*, p. 191.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.* p. 192.

In Urdu, in the verses of Mir and Abru, for example, reference is made to boys from all strata of society, but more often to the 'boys of the market street' [*tiflân-i-tih-bâzâr*]. Mir's verse, for example, makes references to boys from musician, goldsmith, apothecary, washer-man and flower-seller families as often as it does to those from the higher ranking families of a Brahmin, Qazi, Mufti, or Sayyid. But these mentions are mostly a literary conceit and a manner of paying homage to the venerable Persian literary tradition of *ṣahr-âṣob*, where Persian poets describe the beauty and prosperity of a city by listing the charms of handsome boys from various professions and ranks.<sup>42</sup>

The Urdu poets never made a fetish of market boys. Unlike the Uranians, they never consciously rebelled against their society's ethos, nor did they feel compelled to justify their passion in terms of some social good. In the eighteenth century Indo-Muslim society there was no need for either. When Siraj offered to instruct his beloved Hindu boy, it was no more than a ploy to gain his company. Abru instructed a young boy, not in the fine arts and sciences, but in the subtle ways of becoming a proper *ma'ṣûq* and correctly behaving in accord with that role. Urdu poets did not look for the 'Prince' under the 'Pauper's' rags either, nor did they seek to discover the 'natural' boy under the fine raiment of a 'Prince.'

No one presently denies that at least one of the presumed 'beloveds' of the pre-modern Urdu ghazal was a beautiful youth; still most scholars of Urdu literature continue to see homosexual love itself as an aberration that developed in the pre-modern Indo-Muslim society only due to the segregation of sexes at the time. The view is misguided, at best.

As we have argued above, the Indo-Muslim milieu of the eighteenth century Delhi was not blatantly sex-negative. It tolerated homosexuality and did not stigmatize a person merely for his sexual orientation—so long as that person ful-

<sup>42</sup> See Ahmad Gulchin-i Ma'ani, *Ṣahr-Âṣob dar Si'r-i Fârsi* (Teheran, 1967).

filled the more important demands of the society, namely an acceptance of, and submission to, its socio-economic hierarchies, and a willingness to perpetuate the same to some measure. In so far as that milieu was not actively sex-positive either, and in fact contained some latent threats, it encouraged, at most, only licentiousness—as seen in Dargah Quli Khan's memoirs—and not hedonism of any shape. Homosexual passion in the pre-modern Urdu ghazal remained pederastic—i.e. hierarchical, non-mutual, and controlling—because the milieu's dominant values were of the same nature; it never aspired to achieve the mutuality of an ideal gay love. Finally, as one examines the Urdu verses that are unambiguously pederastic in reference, one striking fact sticks out, they are of indifferent quality at best, indicative of the actual indifference with which male homosexuality and its many manifestations were viewed in pre-modern Delhi. Four examples from Mir and Abru should suffice to justify our assertion.

*hai tîra roz apnâ lar̥kon̥ ki dostî men̥*  
*is din hî ko kahe thâ aksar pidar hamârâ*  
 My friendship with boys has darkened my days.  
 My father had warned me of this very day. (Mir)

*lar̥ke jahânâbâd ke yak şahr karte nâz*  
*âjâte haiñ bagal men̥ isâra jahân̥ kiyâ*  
 The Delhi boys are coquetish, but  
 The leap to your side if you just wink. (Mir)

*jab-ki aisâ ho gandumî laundâ*  
*tab gunahgâr kyon̥ na ho âdam*  
 With such a 'wheatish' boy around,  
 How can Man avoid sinning?<sup>43</sup> (Abru)

*sabza-i-kat nahîñ hai jis lab par*  
*us ke bose men̥ kuch savâd nahîñ*

<sup>43</sup> In the Islamicate version of the Eden story, wheat replaces apple as the forbidden food.

No pleasure lies in kissing the lip  
That has no 'verdure' of the down. (Abru)

# Transvestic Words?: The Rekhti in Urdu\*

'The assumption of the female point of view and narrative voice—the assumption of linguistic and narrative female 'subjectivity'—in no way lessens . . . the fundamental elision of the woman as subject. On the contrary, it goes one step further in the total objectification of woman.'

Susanne Kappeler, *The Pornography of Representation*.<sup>1</sup>

The rekhti [*rekhtī*] is a curious poetic genre in Urdu. Historically, the word has come to refer to a body of verse written in an exaggerated 'feminine' voice, full of linguistic, social and bodily details specific to women.<sup>2</sup> Written almost exclusively by men, its audience too has always been overwhelmingly male.<sup>3</sup> Scholars of Urdu literature agree that the name

\* Revised. Originally appeared in *The Annual of Urdu Studies*, no. 16, pt. 1 (2001), pp. 3–26.

<sup>1</sup> Minneapolis, 1986, p. 90.

<sup>2</sup> The first exclusive study of Rekhti was *Tazkira-i-Rekhtī* by Syed Tamkin Kazimi—date unknown; out of print—which I was not able to consult. Of the recent books, Khalil Ahmad Siddiqui's *Rekhtī Kā Tanqīdī Mutālī'a* (Lucknow, 1974; henceforward referred to as *RKTM*) is the most comprehensive and useful.

<sup>3</sup> Nothing suggests that the rekhti was popular among women of any class in the pre-modern period. Only three women poets find mention in the records. Naubahar 'Zalil', a maid of Sulaiman Shikōh: she has only two rekhti verses to her name (*RKTM*, p. 380). 'Begum', a 'temporary wife' [*mamtū'a*] of Wajid Ali Shah, is described by Abdul Ghafur Nassakh describes her as a fine singer; she mostly wrote in the rekhti form, and sent Nassakh five verses for inclusion in his *tazkira*, *Suḡan-i-Su'rā* (Lucknow, 1982, p. 573.) (The other thirty-seven women mentioned by Nassakh—mostly courtesans—wrote the usual ghazal.) And 'Begham.'

'Rekhti' was coined by the 18th century poet Rangin to designate certain verses that he wrote for the entertainment of his patron, Mirza Sulaiman Shikoh, a Mughal prince then living in exile in Lucknow.<sup>4</sup>

Sa'adat Yar Khan, Rangin (1755–1835),<sup>5</sup> was trained by his father to be a soldier of fortune, but he mostly earned his living as a trainer and trader of horses, or as a poet/courtier at various places. He eventually organized his copious writings into nine books, including two divans of conventional ghazals, one of heterosexually explicit erotic verses, and a fourth of rekhtis. In the introduction to the latter, Rangin noted that in Delhi he used to patronize *kāngīs* a great deal, and always paid much attention to their speech.<sup>6</sup> Consequently, he came to know their idiom well and composed verses in it, calling them 'Rekhti'—as opposed to 'Rekhta' [*rekhta*], the term then commonly used to refer to the Urdu ghazal and the language. More telling, perhaps, was the title he gave to that collection, *Angekta* (the aroused [verses]). The thematic contents of Rangin's 'aroused' verses may be summarized as follows: adulterous sex between men and women; sex between women; lustful women; quarrelsome women; jealous women; women's superstitions and rituals; women's exclusive bodily functions; women's clothes and jewellery; and a variety of mundane

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whom Rangin claims as his *gâgird*; he quotes a rekhti by her in *Majâlis-i-Rangin*, calling it a flirtatious rejoinder to his own verses. See *Majâlis-i-Rangin*, ed. Syed Ali Haider (Patna, 1990), pp. 70–71.

<sup>4</sup> Mirza Sulaiman Shikoh arrived in Lucknow from Delhi in 1790, and lived as a 'guest' of the Navabs until sometime in 1828; he died at Agra in 1837. See Syed Kamaluddin Haidar, *Tavâriq-i-Avadh* (Lucknow, 1907) vol. I, p. 280. He also patronized Sahib Qiran, notorious for his sexually explicit verse. See fn. 36 below.

<sup>5</sup> The only major study of Rangin is Sabir Ali Khan, *Sa'adat Yâr Kân Rangin* (Karachi, 1956; reprint 1992.) Only a few of Rangin's poetic works have been published. Autograph manuscripts of his nine books are in the collection of the British Library, London.

<sup>6</sup> *Kāngī*, 'Women secluded in purdah [*parda-nisîn*] who surreptitiously engage in prostitution in their homes' (Syed Ahmad Dihlavi, *Farhang-i-Āsafiyya*).

events in the domestic life of women. Why such disparate subjects were considered 'entertaining' in the Urdu milieu of the late 18th century and why they are still seen by many in the same light were perhaps the primary questions that initiated this paper.

Insha Allah Khan, Insha (1756–1817),<sup>7</sup> a polyglot, multi-talented poet, who also wrote many rekhtis, was a close friend of Rangin. In *Daryā-i-Latāfat*, his delightful book on the Urdu language, Insha has a testy old Delhiite living in Lucknow decry the quality of local poets and poetry, including thus on Rangin: 'Because he is an avid patron of prostitutes [*randī*], Rangin's mind has taken to vulgarity and lewdness [*ṣuhud-pan*]. Consequently, putting aside *rekhta*, he has invented *rekhtī*, hoping that young women of good families would read his verses and fall for him, and that he would then "blacken his face" with them.' Elsewhere in the same book, Insha is only slightly more politic as he again credits Rangin with the invention of the rekhti.<sup>8</sup>

The term 'Rekhti' may indeed have been coined by Rangin, but contrary to his and Insha's claims, the kind of verse it denoted was not his invention.<sup>9</sup> Several poets had already

<sup>7</sup> Insha, deservedly, has received more attention than Rangin. Most of his prose and poetry is available in well-edited editions. Two most useful studies are by Abid Peshawari (Shyam Lal Kalra): *Inṣā'-Allāh Kān, Inṣā'* (Lucknow, 1985); and *Muta'liqāt-i-Inṣā'* (Lucknow, 1985)

<sup>8</sup> Insha Allah Khan Insha, *Daryā-i-Latāfat*, ed. Abdul Haq, tr. Braj Mohan Dattatriya Kaifi (Aurangabad, 1935), pp. 96–7. The second passage is on p. 171, but it leaves out a sentence about Rangin's sexual proclivity. The original Persian, quoted by Badi' Husaini in *Dakan Men Rekhtī Kā Irtiqā* (Hyderabad, India, 1982?), may be translated as '...Rangin ... who is the noblest in friendship and in the manly art of soldiering, and who long rode the charger of his ambition in the field of virility [*bāh*], has had much experience with the women of purdah [*zanān-i-parda-niṣṣin*]. He has written a few pages on their language, and also a volume of verse in that language. He is the inventor of the rekhti . . . (p. 27).'

<sup>9</sup> Not only is Rangin's claim to have invented the rekhti most doubtful, even the special glossary attributed to him by Insha is not his. Imtiaz Ali Khan Arshi compared Rangin's text with a similar compilation by the famous scholar/poet Sirajuddin Ali Khan Arzu (d. 1756), and found

written similar verses in Bijapur and Hyderabad. In fact Rangin may have come across their verse during his many travels or even while in Delhi, before his arrival in Lucknow around 1789. Both Khalil Ahmad Siddiqui and Badi' Husaini list several poets of Deccan who preceded Rangin, and suggest that the verses of one of them, Muhammad Siddiq, Qais (d. 1814?)—a slightly older contemporary of Rangin—could have provided the inspiration for Rangin's alleged invention.<sup>10</sup> Neither, however, credits Qais with inventing the rekhti. That distinction, according to them, belongs to Syed Miran, Hashimi' (d. ca. 1697), who spent most of his life in Burhanpur and Bijapur.<sup>11</sup> Hashimi was not attached to the Adil Shahi court; he did, however, have many patrons among the nobility. Reportedly he was blind, though perhaps not from birth.

The ghazal in Dakani was written in what we might roughly call two modes, the 'Persian' and the 'Indic'. In the 'Persian' mode, the poet/lover used a masculine voice for himself, and addressed a beloved who could be male or female grammatically as well as in sexual identity. In the 'Indic' mode, on the other hand, the poet/lover adopted a feminine voice for himself, while addressing a beloved who was always male. Dakani poets freely used the two modes, frequently using both in the same ghazal. In either case, the dominant themes for them

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Rangin's list to be a literal translation of Arzu's findings. See Ahad Ali Khan Yakta, *Dastūr-al-Fasāhat*, ed. Imtiaz Ali Khan Arshi (Rampur, 1943), Introduction, p. 2, fn. 1.

<sup>10</sup> *RKTM*, pp. 237–8; Husaini, *Dakan Men*, p. 138 ff. Husaini details the remarkable similarity between some of the rekhtis of the two poets. Qais's rekhti divan remains unpublished; three manuscripts are available at Hyderabad, one stating that the poet 'has used the idiom of the vivacious [*gok*] begums of the imperial palaces of Shahjahanabad.' That, no doubt, made the verses more exotic and pleasing to his patrons.

<sup>11</sup> Muhammad Ehsanullah's *Hāsimi Bijāpūrī* (Lahore, 1982) is the only full-length study. Jalibi in his *Tārik-i-Adab-i-Urdū*, vol. I (Lahore, 1975) has a long section devoted to Hashimi (pp. 354–369). Hafiz Qateel's edition of Hashimi's verse, *Hāsimi Bijāpūrī, Mutavaffi 1109 Hijri, ki Rekhtiyān* (Hyderabad, 1961), is quite dependable.



were love—mystical or worldly—and its pains and pleasures, and not the topics mentioned earlier as peculiar to the rekhti.

Hashimi seems to have done two things. He added the domestic life of the women of elite households to the thematic range of his ghazals; and he made the language of the 'Indic' mode replete with a peculiarly feminine vocabulary, which was not the case earlier. His published divan contains 305 ghazals, out of which 240 are identical in content with what later came to be called rekhtis. Significantly, Hashimi does not separate the latter into a distinct group; in fact he frequently has the 'rekhti' and 'non-rekhti' verses in the same ghazal. But he is definitely aware of the difference between his new verse and the ghazal of the 'Indic' mode. In one *maqta'*, his poetic persona declares: *diye hain hâsimî 'izzat hamârî û'î kî bolî kûn* (Hashimi has given dignity to our *û'î* speech)—*û'î* being an exclusively feminine exclamation of surprise. In another ghazal, he says, *bole hai kûb bhotic gazlân bhî ka'î zanânî* (. . . you have also composed many fine *zanânî* (feminine) ghazals). Elsewhere in the divan, however, he refers to his compositions simply as ghazals. No contemporary of Hashimi seems to have emulated him.

It should be underscored here that it was not just having a female narrative voice that differentiated the rekhti from other genres, for that alone could be true of any number of ghazals written in Dakani that are now described as being in the 'Indic' mode. (In fact, in many verses of Hashimi and Insha we can discern a male addressing a female.) Rather, the chief distinguishing feature was the so-called 'feminine-ness' of its vocabulary and themes. That becomes clear from the definition set forth by Ahad Ali Khan Yakta, who finished his *tazkira* in 1834, not too long after Rangin and Insha had popularized the rekhti in Lucknow: 'Rekhti is a kind of poetry in which only the speech and idioms of women are used and only those matters are mentioned that happen between

women or between a woman and a man. Further, it must not contain any word or phrase that is exclusive to men.'<sup>12</sup>

Additionally, on the basis of our own readings of the rekhtis of Hashimi, Rangin, and Insha, we can posit three other differences between the rekhti and the *rekhta*, the conventional ghazal, of which the former was implied by Rangin and Insha to have been the 'feminine' form.

(a) Compared to the usually multi-valenced and/or symbolic language of the ghazal, the language of the rekhti is almost crudely realistic, and devoid of any ambiguity or multiplicity of referents. Its meaning is fixed.

(b) In the ghazal, the averred protagonists are never named; they remain simply 'the lover', 'the beloved', and so forth. In the rekhti, however, proper names may be used, though only in a non-specifying manner. Interestingly, it also happens in the *hazl*, i.e. in sexually explicit humorous poetry—e.g. in the *hazl* of Rangin and Sahib Qiran. That strongly suggests that there could be some shared goals or intentions underlying the two genres.

(c) Whereas in the ghazal the object of the lover's passion is celebrated and idealized, there is in the rekhti no grand passion and, consequently, no idealization of the desired object either. In fact the rekhti often seems to mock or denigrate its object of desire.

Only one more major poet needs to be mentioned to conclude this historical section, i.e. Mir Yar Ali, Jan Sahib (1810–1886). Born in Farrukhabad, he grew up in Lucknow and also spent much of his life there.<sup>13</sup> After the dissolution of the kingdom of Avadh in 1856, he briefly lived in Bhopal and Delhi before eventually settling in Rampur, where he enjoyed the patronage of the local nawab. In contrast to the

<sup>12</sup> Yakta, *Dastûr*, Text, p. 97.

<sup>13</sup> The 1845 edition of Jan Sahib's divan, published in his life, is not extant. Even the carefully edited, but expurgated, editions put out by Nizami Badayuni (Badaun, 1923 and 1927) are hard to come by. I have used the 1927 edition.

earlier masters, Jan Sahib wrote exclusively in the rekhti mode. He, however, modified and widened its thematic parameters with great skill and imagination. He minimized, if not entirely discarded, the subject of lesbian sex, highlighted the life of married women and their relationships with members of their extended families, made comments on life outside the confines of the household and, like Rangin, wrote several other types of topical poems in the language of the rekhti.

Subsequent rekhti poets have modelled themselves after Jan Sahib, including our own contemporaries. With the passage of time, the use of sexually explicit language and the mention of lesbian sex has disappeared completely; instead, there now appears an increasing concern with social and political issues and a somewhat sympathetic view of women. But an exaggerated, presumably 'feminine' voice still remains its distinctive feature, as does its avowed function as 'entertainment'.<sup>14</sup>

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Thematic developments in the rekhti, from Hashimi to Jan Sahib and later, may be summarized as follows:

Hashimi: wrote conventional ghazals in both the 'Indic' and 'Persian' modes, sometimes even in the same ghazal; placed his rekhti and conventional ghazals in the same divan; while mainly employing 'realistic' language in his rekhtis, also made some use of conventional 'symbols'; displayed a didactic intention by offering advice on domestic behaviour to women; made fun of the 'peevish' woman, but quite infrequently;<sup>15</sup> and mentioned only heterosexual acts. Examples:

*Kāvind kī apne ai nanhī sevāk ho nit sevā karo*

*har kis kī sunkar bāt cup nā kar naṣar seva karo*

You're your husband's maid, little girl, so serve him constantly.

Don't spread gossip, be quiet—make that a habit.

<sup>14</sup> Siddiqui, *RKTM*, brings the story to the 1920s. For later poets, see Irfan Abbasi, *Tazkira-i-Ṣu'arā-i-Rekhtī* (Lucknow, 1989).

<sup>15</sup> This 'peevish woman' is discussed in detail below.

*omū āven to parde son gharī bhar bhār baiṭhūngī*  
*bahāna kar-ke motiyan ke pirote hār baiṭhūngī*

If he comes I shall sit outside for a moment, unveiled,  
 Pretending that I was stringing pearls into a necklace.

*ajī main peṭ te hūn choro merī peṣvāz kā dāman*  
*hoegā ghor zulum mujh par, judā hone se dartī hūn*

Hey, let go of my gown! I'm pregnant.  
 It will be a terrible thing—I'm scared I may lose the baby.

*laṭāpat men tute hain ko'ī yū band dekhe to hai muṣkil*  
*biṭārī sās miskīn hai nanad dekhe to hai muṣkil*

My gown's ties got torn in the tussle—how awful if someone sees!  
 My mother-in-law is harmless, but the sister-in-law, she is trouble.

*kahā kyā 'aib hai bolo jo sina hath son chīne kā*  
*kahī main jī-ic dūngī ho jo lenge nā'on sine kā*

'What's the harm,' I said, 'if I touch your breasts?'  
 'I'll kill myself,' she said, 'if you even mention my breasts.'

Qais, Rangin, and Insha: wrote conventional ghazals only in the 'Persian' mode;<sup>16</sup> used only 'realistic' language in their rekhtis; separately organized their rekhti and conventional ghazals; displayed no didactic intention, aiming only to 'entertain'; made conspicuous fun of the 'peevish' woman; and mentioned both lesbian and heterosexual acts. Examples:

*kāhe ko pahmūngī, bāji, main tumhārī angiyā*  
*ek se ek mere pās hai bhārī angiyā*

Why should I wear your bodice, sister, when I have  
 My own many, each richer than the other. (Qais)

*rāt koṭhe pe terī dekh lī corī annā*  
*kālī ūpar thī carhī nīce thī gorī annā*

On the roof last night, Nanny, I found out your secret:

<sup>16</sup> My statement is restricted to Rangin and Insha; I had no access to the actual collections of Qais's poetry.

The black one was on top, Nanny, and the fair underneath. (Qais)

*tokiyān dhilī haiṅ aur tang piḥāvan meṅ dadā*

*is tarah bhī ko'ī sītā hai gaṁvārī angiyā*

The cups are loose; the backside is tight—

Only a bumpkin sews such a bodice, Nanny. (Qais)

*guzre haiṅ ma'mūl se par din do-ḡand*

*ab-ke hui hūṅ mainṅ ḡazab be-namāz*

Twice as many days [of menses] than my usual!

I never missed so many prayers before. (Rangin)

*rangiṅ qasam hai terī hī hūṅ maile sir se mainṅ*

*mat khol kar-ke minnat-o-zārī izār-band*

I swear to you, Rangin, I still have a 'dirty head.'<sup>17</sup>

Don't beg and plead, please; don't untie the pajama string. (Rangin)

*āj kyōṅ tū ne dogāna ye sabūrā bāṇdhā*

*ṭhes lagti hai, bhalā kyōṅ-ki bace-dān bace*

Why did you tie on this dildo, dear *dogāna*?<sup>18</sup>

It hurts. I fear for my womb. (Rangin)

*ek to ḡakl qarānī hai terī biḡā sī*

*tis-pe ye phoṛ-ke dide mujhe mat ḡhūr dadā*

Your face scares me as it is, Nanny, like a ghoul's.

Don't go glaring at me bulging your eyes too. (Rangin)

*mardūā mujh se kahe hai ḡalo ārām karenṅ*

*jis ko ārām vo samjhe hai vo ārām ho nauj*

The wretch says, 'Come, let's rest for a while.'

Sure! His 'rest' would be some rest indeed! (Insha)

*sāre bhūtoṅ se pare hai ye muā kvājā kabis*

*mujh-ko ḡhūrā hī kare hai ye muā kvājā kabis*

<sup>17</sup> i.e. 'I'm still having my period.'

<sup>18</sup> *Dogāna*, each member of a pair of women who have ritually chosen—i.e. by sharing a 'twin' piece of fruit or vegetable—to be intimate friends.

He's worse than any haunting spirit, this wretched Khvaja.<sup>19</sup>  
He just keeps staring at me, this wretched eunuch. (Insha)

*main to kuch khelî nahîñ hûñ aisi kac̣cî goliyân*  
*jo na samjhûñ bî-zinâkî-jî tumhârî boliyân*  
I'm not as naive as you think, dear *zinâkî*.<sup>20</sup>  
I know what your words really mean. (Insha)

Jan Sahib: wrote only rekhtis, though in more forms than others; made fun of the 'peevisish' woman; mentioned heterosexual acts almost exclusively; commented on events outside the domestic world; showed traces of empathy with women; and made some attempt at moralization directed at women. And that basically remained true for those who came after Jan Sahib. Examples:

*vo hâthâ-pâ'î râṭ ko kî mujh se cānd kân*  
*mahram katân kî tum ne merî târ-târ kî*  
Chand Khan, you were too rough last night!  
You tattered my fine muslin brassiere. (Jan Sahib)

*tum agar doge na tan-peṭ ko roṭî-kapṛâ*  
*kyâ kudâ ke bhi nahîñ ghar meñ thikânâ merâ*  
You won't give me even a slice of bread or a piece of cloth!  
You think I won't find shelter in God's house either? (Jan Sahib)

*le cūkâ muñh meñ hai lallû merî sau bâr zubân*  
*ho gayâ kab kâ musalmân, ye kyâ kâfir hai*  
He has sucked my tongue many a time, this Lallu.  
He has long been a Muslim—he's no *kâfir*. (Jan Sahib)

*mujh-ko to dâlâ ghar meñ firangin ke ho murîd*  
*masjid banâ'î âp ne girjâ ke sâmnē*

<sup>19</sup> The eunuch who supervised a seraglio was called the Khvaja Sira.

<sup>20</sup> Lit., identified by the wishbone of a chicken. When two women became fond of each other they held and pulled apart the wishbone [*zinâk*] of a chicken, thus ritually formalizing their mutual love.

You brought me home, but devote yourself to that English woman.  
You built a mosque, no doubt, but in front of a church. (Jan Sahib)

*qâqû tak rakhnâ na ab ghar men bahâdur mirzâ*  
*hote haiñ hukm se sarkâr ke hathiyâr talâs*

Don't keep at home even a pocket knife, Bahadur Mirza;<sup>21</sup>  
The government has ordered searches for weapons. (Jan Sahib)

*zâl to beşak hai tû, beṭâ, agar rustam nahîñ*  
*bâr do do jorū'ôn kâ aur kamar men kam nahîñ*

You are certainly a Zal, if not in fact a Rustam!<sup>22</sup>  
You serve two wives, but your 'back' isn't bent. (Begum)<sup>23</sup>

*phir namû'î 'aurton par jo na ho thorâ hai zulm*  
*kaunsilon men jab koî begam nahîñ kânam nahîñ*

No Begums or Khanums in the council houses—  
No wonder wretched women suffer such cruelty. (Begum)

*ilâhî kûn thûke, saut ko ho 'âriza sil kâ*  
*uṭhâ-kar le-ga 'î, jhârû-phirî, battâ merî sil kâ*

May my rival spit blood and die of consumption!  
The wretch ran off with my mortar's pestle. (Shaida)<sup>24</sup>

*susrâl men jo pâdûñ to maike men ho kabâr*  
*ik iṣṭihâr nand hai ik iṣṭihâr sâs*

I fart in my husband's house; it's reported back to my mother—  
A pair of fliers they are, my mother-in-law and her daughter. (Shaida)

*ek to hai god men aur dusrâ hai peṭ men*  
*sâl bhar se mujh pe hai âfat pe âfat dekhnâ*  
I carry one in my lap, and another in my belly.

<sup>21</sup> Bahadur Mirza can be a name; it can also mean, ironically, 'Brave Mirza.'

<sup>22</sup> Zal was the father of Rustam, the legendary Iranian warrior.

<sup>23</sup> Abid Mirza, Begum, was born in 1857 in Lucknow, grew up in Calcutta in the household of the exiled King of Avadh, and eventually lived in Hyderabad (RKTm, pp. 472–482).

<sup>24</sup> Nisar Husain Khan, Shaida (b. 1868?), of Allahabad; published his collection of rekhtis in 1932. (RKTm, pp. 490–511.)

It's been for me a long year—one mess after another. (Shaida)

*mardu 'e qaid hu 'e 'aurteñ âzâd hu 'în*

*kaisâ â 'în banâyâ hai vatan se pûcho*

Men have been chained; women are made free.

Tell me, my country, what rule is this? (Sajni)<sup>25</sup>

*çâr karke vo itrâ 'e haiñ*

*das karûñ main agar bas çale*

He smirks because he took 'four.'

If I had my way, I'd take 'ten.' (Sajni)

*talâq de to rahe ho 'itâb-o-qahr ke sâth*

*merâ şabâb bhî lauğâ-do mere mahr ke sâth*

So you're greatly enraged and divorcing me? Go ahead!

You should also give my youth back when you pay my *mahr*.<sup>26</sup>  
(Sajni)

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Modern historians of Urdu literature do not shy away from mentioning the rekhti in their accounts, but one gets the impression that they feel uneasy around the subject. In the only book length study of Hashimi's poetry, Muhammad Ehsanullah tries hard to establish him as a poet of rectitude and decency. According to Ehsanullah, 'Hashimi's rekhti was not devoted to entertainment and sensuality. . . . He has often kept before himself a purpose, that of directing women towards a life of decency and morality.'<sup>27</sup> Accordingly, when

<sup>25</sup> Syed Sajid, Sajni (1922–1993?); originally from Lucknow, but spent much of his life in Bhopal; one published collection, *Nigoriyât* (Bhopal, 1987). Interestingly, by his own admission he took up Rekhti only after moving to Bhopal, and after realizing his limitations as a ghazal poet. The 'exotica' from Lucknow succeeded where his ghazal failed.

<sup>26</sup> *Mahr* is the 'bride-money' that a Muslim husband should give to his wife before the marriage may be consummated. The rule is hardly ever observed in South Asia—the reason why this couplet was widely quoted in Urdu newspapers during the famous 'Shah Bano' case in the 1980s.

<sup>27</sup> Ehsanullah, *Hâgimî*, p. 153–4.



Ehsanullah classifies Hashimi's verses by their contents, he sets up six categories: (1) love thoughts of an unmarried woman; (2) love thoughts of a wife for her husband; (3) jealous thoughts of a wife towards her rival; (4) events of daily life; (5) advice to women; and (6) erotic interactions [*mu'âmala-bandī*]. To further underscore his point, he claims that though he examined more than three thousand couplets by Hashimi, no more than two hundred could be considered *mubtazal* or vulgar. Apparently he does not think that one-in-fifteen was high enough a number to indicate any particular proclivity on Hashimi's part, and that when he had already included Hashimi's other erotic verses in two 'non-vulgar' categories. Ehsanullah concedes that one can find a 'shameless woman' in Hashimi's verses, but asserts that such verses come with others that are morally edifying. Jamil Jalibi, on the other hand, declares in his magisterial history of Urdu literature that Hashimi was almost single-mindedly devoted to erotic, even licentious verses.<sup>28</sup>

The wide difference between the two assessments is, of course, very telling. One soon discovers that each author has a favourite explanation for the existence of the rekhti in Urdu. Ehsanullah begins by declaring that Urdu was unique in having separate varieties [*zabân*] for men and women—i.e. Urdu contained verbs, adjective, idioms and proverbs that were uniquely feminine. He adds that Urdu speaking women were secluded in purdah and were denied education, and these two factors enhanced the existing difference. In other words, for Ehsanullah, the rekhti of Hashimi was the natural response of a sensitive and sympathetic poet to an existing socio-linguistic situation. Jalibi, on the other hand, believes that when a society begins to 'decline' it becomes less 'manly' and devotes itself to the pleasures of the senses. Thus for Jalibi, the rekhti was an inevitable consequence of a socio-political situation, namely an alleged falling from grace of the Urdu-speaking Muslim elite of India.

<sup>28</sup> Jalibi, *Tārīk*, vol. I, p. 364–6.

The two explanations form the staple for all the studies of the rekhti that I was able to consult. Khalil Ahmad Siddiqui believes that rekhti was the expression of a society given to sensual pleasure: 'When merely talking about women no longer satisfied them, the poets turned to the language and sentiments of the women themselves.'<sup>29</sup> An earlier scholar, Abullais Siddiqui, argues that 'Femininity combined with obscene talk [*nisâ'iyat aur fohş-goî*] laid the foundation of the rekhti.' 'We sense in [Rangin's rekhti],' he writes, 'the depth of mental decline the society had then reached ; we also discern the psychological malaise which, when healthy channels are closed, forces human feelings to go astray and seek unnatural ways of expression.' For him, 'the rekhti's only worthy aspect is this: in it are preserved the elegance and subtlety of the language of the courtesans and their special idioms.'<sup>30</sup> Even Agha Haidar Hasan, perhaps the most sympathetic writer on the subject, begins by stating: 'When a nation or people's [*qaum*] civilization reaches its highest point, a decline sets in, and men begin to display much more sensuality and also peculiarities of habits and fashion [*rangîni, bânkpan aur waz'-dârî*].'<sup>31</sup>

Again and again we find in these and other authors a sense of shame at the alleged 'femininity' of the rekhti; they soon name it the 'unmanliness' of the rekhti poets, and locate its origin in the decline in the political power of the Urdu speaking Muslim elite of North India. Needless to say, in other contexts these and other authors reverse the reasoning and allege that a growing 'effeminacy' of that same society—regarded synonymous with cultural decline—was itself an important

<sup>29</sup> *RKTM*, p. 93.

<sup>30</sup> Abul Lais Siddiqui, *Lakhna'û Kâ Dabistân-i-Şâ'irî* (Delhi, 1965, reprint), pp. 41, 362.

<sup>31</sup> Jan Sahib, *Dîvân-i-Jân Sâhib*, ed. Agha Haidar Hasan (Badaun, 1927), Introduction, p. 4. Hasan, as a *tour de force*, begins his Introduction in the language of the rekhti.

cause for the loss of political power.<sup>32</sup> The conflict and confusion is best seen in Muhammad Husain Azad's remark on the rekhti. No less a believer in the political 'unmanliness' of his compatriots but scared of angering his colonial masters, Azad wrote, 'This invention [i.e. the rekhti] should be considered one cause for the effeminacy, lack of ambition, and cowardice that developed in common people.'<sup>33</sup> What they all seem to miss is a recognition of the fact that rekhtis were written before that so-called 'decadent' age, and they continued to be written after it.

Pre-modern literary historians, i.e. the *tazkira*-writers, also do not show much enthusiasm for the rekhti. Ghulam Hamdani, Mushafi, to whom Rangin briefly showed his ghazals, does not mention Rangin's rekhti when he writes about him in his *tazkira*.<sup>34</sup> Yakta, whose definition of the rekhti was noted earlier, does not include even a single rekhti couplet while quoting extensively from Rangin's conventional ghazals.<sup>35</sup> Mustafa Khan, Shefta, a close friend of Ghalib, places the rekhti in the same category as the *hazl* and considers it an inferior form of poetry. He gives no example from Rangin's rekhtis.<sup>36</sup> Qutbuddin, Batin, who favours everything that Shefta dislikes, defends Rangin, but only in a cursory fashion. He quotes three of Rangin's rekhti couplets, namely the first three verses of the *divan*, which, as convention requires, are in

<sup>32</sup> *RKTM*, pp. 93-94; 104-117.

<sup>33</sup> Muhammad Husain Azad, *Āb-i-Hayāt* (Lahore, 1917), p. 272.

<sup>34</sup> Ghulam Hamdani, Mushafi, *Tazkirat-al-Ṣu'arā*, ed. Akbar Hyderi (Lucknow, 1980), pp. 137-40.

<sup>35</sup> Yakta, *Dastūr*, Text, p. 96 ff.

<sup>36</sup> Mustafa Khan, Shefta, *Gulshan-i-Be-Kār* (Lucknow, 1982, reprint), p. 88. In his comments on Sahib Qiran, perhaps the most notorious poet in Urdu, Shefta is still more critical. And yet he allows himself to quote one 'excellently subtle' couplet so that 'the bold and lusty youths [among his readers] should have nothing to complain about (p. 124).' The couplet: '*mujh ko ṣahvat hu'ī tayammum se // thī muqarrar kisī chināl kī kāk*,' 'I got horny doing the *tayammum*; // It must have been some harlot's dust'; *tayammum* being the use of clean dust or sand, instead of water, for ritual ablutions.

praise of God.<sup>37</sup> In other words, he too was not particularly admiring of the rekhti.

Qadir Bakhsh, Sabir, who comes a bit later but still belongs to the older order, wrongly credits Insha with inventing the rekhti—making Rangin only an imitator—but he does not quote any rekhti verse from either. On the other hand, he mentions Jan Sahib, and quotes his verses with approval.<sup>38</sup> Sabir, however, reserves his highest praise for the rekhtis of his contemporary Delhi poet, Mirza Ali Beg, Naznin, and makes some interesting comparative comments:

This ignorant writer Sabir, a man of little skill, has examined carefully and fairly the rekhti of the three [i.e. Insha, Rangin, and Jan Sahib], and rarely found that they had combined the language of the rekhti with the subtleties of the art of poetry to bring forth something refreshing and heart-pleasing. Mostly there is nothing [in their verse] but conversations of women, and matters which are, for connoisseurs of poetry and subtle-minded people, foolish and improper [*fuzûl . . . nâ-ma'qûl*]. Impropropriety [*nâ-ma'qûliyat*] does not mean that they have polluted their pen with obscene or sexually arousing words [*kalâm-i-fohş-âmez yâ kalimât-i-şahvat-angez*], for that is an essential aspect, in fact the very leaven, of this kind of verse. What is improper is that the events which happen to a woman in her domestic life—e.g. going for a visit to some female relative or friend, inviting some male relative to her home, desiring the husband to buy her a ring, or entreating him to get her blouse and bra dyed a new colour—are depicted by them so unsubtly that no poet of good taste can get any pleasure out of them. On the other hand, [Naznin] has depicted the same with a subtlety that is overwhelming.<sup>39</sup>

Discounting Sabir's obvious bias in favour of Naznin, a fellow *dillî-wâlâ*, what we get from him is a fairly accurate description of the main themes of the rekhti at the time.

<sup>37</sup> Qutbuddin, Batin, *Gulistân-i-Be-Kizân* (Lucknow, 1982, reprint), p. 99.

<sup>38</sup> Mirza Qadir Bakhsh, Sabir, *Gulistân-i-Sukan* (Lucknow, 1982, reprint), p. 254 (on Rangin); p. 184 (on Jan Sahib).

<sup>39</sup> Ibid. pp. 445–6.

By now it should be obvious that the rekhti, contrary to Rangin's assertion, was not a 'feminine'-ization of Rekhta; if anything, it was a trivialization of it. Insha's allegation about Rangin's lecherous intentions was probably more than just a joke between friends, but that is not of much importance. More significant is the fact that Rangin was hugely successful in pleasing his princely patron, as well as his own peers, not so much by meeting some standards of good poetry as by satisfying some shared expectation of entertainment. Apparently adultery and sex between women, on the one hand, and quarrelsome females, feminine superstitions and ordinary domestic events, on the other, were then perceived—and also now—as highly entertaining, even more so when expressed in a female narrative voice.

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Sexual words are always good for a chuckle or two, particularly when we feel ourselves safe from any consequences; the excitement comes not as much from indulging in something forbidden as from the thrill of getting away with it. That, however, would not fully explain the motives of the rekhti poets of the past. The early rekhti poets and their peers did not have to worry about a Victorian censor. They could use any word or trope they felt was apt for their purpose, and they did. I know of no manuscript of their verses where words have been replaced by asterisks or blank spaces. In fact, unabashed ribaldry, profanity, and scatological details abound in at least one kind of writings of many major pre-modern poets—the rekhti and non-rekhti alike—namely, their satirical verses. We would not be wrong, therefore, if we viewed the rekhti as very much a satirical verse that aimed to entertain its male audience by making gross fun of females. Its enhanced appeal lay in the fact that it also pretended to be a view from the inside—in fact, it claimed to be the very words of whom it ridiculed.

Earlier a comparison was made between the rekhti and the conventional ghazal to highlight their differences. But the overly sublime creature of the ghazal and the quite disagree-

able protagonist of the rekhti are also age-old and authentic in equal measure in Urdu culture. If the idealized beloved of the ghazal is traceable to the theories of profane love among the Arabs,<sup>40</sup> the lustful and quarrelsome women of the rekhti are traceable to other, equally edifying, medieval texts. The two stereotypes, of course, are intimately linked and interdependent.

The lustful woman of the rekhti who cannot be satisfied or controlled sexually is abundantly present not only in such entertaining Islamicate texts as the *Arabian Nights*—the classic, in fact, launches its narration by presenting three such insatiable women—but also in those more edifying treatises that claim to deal with the essential natures of men and women, namely books of *adab* and treatises on medicine. This woman is heterosexual, and lusts for men, but when men are not available, she engages in sex with whatever comes handy, with domestic animals, as in some Arabic texts, or with other women, as in the rekhti. (Sex with other women, however, does not imply a change in sexual orientation—it is merely a momentary aberration, corrected by the first man who appears on the scene.)<sup>41</sup> This sexually voracious woman in Islamicate and Indian texts—both medieval and modern, and both popular and elite—has been much commented upon recently, for example in the writings of Fatima Mernissi, Fatma A. Sabbah, and Fedwa Malti-Douglas on the Islamicate side and Sudhir Kakar on the Indian.<sup>42</sup> Sabbah calls this creation of the

<sup>40</sup> See, for example, A. Kh. Kinany, *The Development of Gazal in Arabic Literature* (Damascus, 1951), and Lois Anita Giffen, *Theory of Profane Love Among the Arabs: The Development of the Genre* (New York, 1971).

<sup>41</sup> This common male fantasy is played out in one of Rangin's *masnavis* where two women making love to each other in a garden are surprised by a man, who not only explains to them how improper their behaviour was but quickly puts them aright by having sex with both of them (*RKTM*, pp. 330–334).

<sup>42</sup> Fatima Mernissi, *Beyond the Veil: Male-Female Dynamics in a Modern Muslim Society* (Cambridge, 1975); Fatma A. Sabbah, *Woman in the Muslim Unconscious* (New York, 1984); Fedwa Malti-Douglas, *Woman's Body, Woman's Word: Gender and Discourse in Arabo-Islamic Writing*

Muslim male fantasy, 'the omnisexual woman.' 'The omnisexual woman,' she writes, 'is woman-as-body, exclusively physical. Her other dimensions, especially the psychological, economic, and engendering dimensions, are not reduced or marginalized; they are nonexistent.' Kakar, likewise, argues, 'The fantasy [of the Hindu male, as reflected in *The Laws of Manu*] thus starts with the wish to "guard" a woman from her overwhelming sexual temptation and from the interlopers who would exploit it for their own and her pleasure. Yet guarding her by force is not realistically possible, and perhaps it is better to keep her thoroughly engaged in household work and thus fancy free. . . . On the other hand, even the dam of "busy-ness" is really not enough to constrain her erotic turbulence. . . .' Suffice it to say that this 'woman-as-body' of the male unconscious, common to both the patriarchies, was very much a source for what came to be seen as the 'entertainment' value of the rekhti.

It would, however, be useful to dilate a little upon the quarrelsome woman of our poets' imaginary, for she is not that well-known. All *adab* texts warn men to expect the worst of their wives. Wives are expected to be shrewish, and should be bullied into submission immediately. As the well-known Persian proverb, which is also popular in Urdu, puts it: 'Kill the cat the first day.'<sup>43</sup> These and other edifying texts repeatedly assert that jealousy, quarrelling, and cursing come naturally to

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(Princeton, 1991); and Sudhir Kakar, *Intimate Relations: Exploring Indian Sexuality* (New Delhi, 1989). The subsequent quotations are from Sabbah (p. 25) and Kakar (p. 18).

<sup>43</sup> The story for the proverb is not dissimilar in its strategy to the story of *The Taming of the Shrew*. An examination of two short books on proverbs—Syed Masud Hasan Rizavi, *Farhang-i-Amsâl* (Lucknow, 1958); Munir Lakhnawi, *Kazîna-i-Aqvâl-o-Amsâl* (Kanpur, 1932)—turned up five Persian and two Urdu proverbs condemning women, e.g. 'If a woman didn't have a nose she'd be eating shit,' three Urdu proverbs praising men, e.g. 'A man's name is mightier than the man himself,' and one Persian proverb favouring wives, 'He who doesn't have a wife, doesn't have bodily comfort.' Also see, Yunus Ugaskar, *Urdû Kahâvateñ Aur Un Ke Samâjî Va Lisânî Pahlû* (New Delhi, 1988), pp. 178–182.

women. Not surprisingly then, one finds this view expressed even in the female-reform literature that appeared in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in Urdu, including many of the books written by women. In these novels, the woman that needs to be reformed is always shown as swearing, cursing, and throwing tantrums. What is most telling is that the linguistic effects used to bring out her character are elsewhere employed to describe the parameters of an exclusively 'feminine' language. When Urdu literary historians commend Nazir Ahmad for having a masterful control of 'women's speech,' they have in mind not the words of his model women but the language of his less-edifying females. The 'good' women in his books talk like men, or at least almost like them.

The strength of this belief in a 'naturally' peevish woman can be seen in the fact that it finds expression even where one least expects it. Here are two examples from Syed Sulaiman Nadvi, a highly regarded Muslim scholar of the past century. In his book on A'isha, the beloved wife of the Prophet Muhammad, even he slips in the following statements because they come 'natural' to him: 'Once someone stole something of Hazrat A'isha's. *As is customary with women*, she cursed that person;' or, 'Once on a journey, her camel began to walk too fast. *Like all women*, a curse fell off her lips too.'<sup>44</sup>

There is, however, another aspect to this matter, particularly in the context of Lucknow. Fights have always been seen as good entertainment. In the Lucknow of Rangin's time, organized fights were a popular form of entertainment. And not just the usual wrestling or jousting matches between men. There were cock fights, ram fights, quail fights, partridge fights—each a blood sport that even common people could indulge in, shedding the blood of innocent birds, of course, not their own—while the royalty additionally enjoyed fights between elephants, between camels, between bears, or between a

<sup>44</sup> Syed Sulaiman Nadvi, *Sirat-al-'a'isha* (Karachi, 1967), p. 41. Emphasis added.



mix of them. Then there was a still more curious kind of fight. A frequent entertainment for men of means was to invite certain lower class women to put on a display of quarrelling and cursing. They are said to have been *bhaṭiyârins* or the women who cooked meals for travellers staying at inns. Apparently the women gained their dubious reputation because they would fight over their customers. That an organized display of their fighting was considered so enjoyable by upper class men<sup>45</sup>—and, perhaps, by women too—suggests a parallel for the entertainment value of the quarrelsome woman of the rekhti. The rekhti women quarrel with each other or with their lovers; there is, in the rekhti, no shrewish wife driving her husband to distraction.<sup>46</sup> Likewise, in the puppet shows that I saw growing up in Avadh, the featured attraction used to be a pair of hugely quarrelsome female puppets called Gulabo and Shatabo, who would burst onto the stage flailing at each other. Male puppets, as I recall, were different; they fought in ‘manly’ ways, and always had some ostensible cause too. Not so, with Gulabo and Shatabo—they just fought and fought.

Further insights into the rekhti as an ‘entertainment’ become available when we consider how and when it was presented to an audience. A passing comment in the famous novel, *Umrao Jan Ada*, informs us that rekhti poets were ranked among the non-serious jocular poets in any musha’irah—for someone to be asked to read before the rekhti poets, who usually read first, was a clear indication of

<sup>45</sup> The fights would formally start, it is said, by one woman saying to the other, ‘*â’o paṛosan laṛen*,’ ‘Come, neighbour, let’s fight.’ The other, expressing utmost scorn, would respond, ‘*laṛe merī jûṭī*,’ ‘My slipper fights with you.’ No verbal holds were barred after that.

<sup>46</sup> That woman appears later, in the prose writings of such humorists as Shaukat Thanvi and Azim Beg Chughtai, and infrequently in the more recent rekhti. But, importantly, she is never mean or evil; she is charming and is basically treated as a plaything—to be humoured, yes, but finally controlled.

that person being considered an absolute buffoon.<sup>47</sup> And it was not just their verses that provided entertainment, the way the rekhti poets presented themselves and read the verses was also a major source of delight. We have no record of how Rangin and Insha read the rekhti before their princely patron, but some later poets, we are told, used vivid gestures while presenting their verses.<sup>48</sup> The terms employed in such descriptions are *batlânâ* and *adâ karnâ*, which are also used in the context of dance and light classical singing. The former indicates the use of mostly hand gestures, facial expressions and eye movements to underscore the words, while the latter refers to the modulation of one's voice for the same purpose. Azad, in *Âb-i-Hayât*, has Insha use his long scarf as a woman's *dupattâ* to cover his head and gesture in an effeminate manner, as he addressed his patron with a rekhti verse.<sup>49</sup> In the fictional account of a pre-1857 musha'irah in Delhi, written by someone who had heard eyewitness accounts of similar events, we are told that the host had a fine muslin coverlet [*orhnî*] brought on a tray to the rekhti poet Naznin, who then put it on coyly, and used hand gestures and voice modulations as he read his verses.<sup>50</sup>

<sup>47</sup> Mirza Muhammad Hadi, Ruswa, *Umrâo Jân Adâ* (New Delhi, 1971), p.84. The English translation, *The Courtesan of Lucknow* (New Delhi, 1961), by Khushwant Singh and M. A. Husaini, has, 'the comic poets (p.39),' which is not quite accurate. Farhatullah Beg, in *Dihlî kî Âkîrî Sam'*, has Naznin read after just one other poet, 'Yal,' a comic figure. See Akhtar Qamber, *The Last Musha'irah of Delhi* (New Delhi, 1979), pp. 74-5. Abdur Razzaq Kanpuri, in his memoirs *Yâd-i-Ayyâm* (Lahore, 1993), describes a rekhti poet, Ismat (a *şâgird* of Naznin's), to have read at dawn, at the very end of a musha'irah at the beginning of the the last century (pp. 90-91). That could have been due to the poet's status as a special guest.

<sup>48</sup> Nassakh, *Sukan*, p. 420.

<sup>49</sup> Azad, *Âb-i Hayât*, p. 289.

<sup>50</sup> Mirza Farhatullah Beg, *Dihlî Kî Âkîrî Sam'*, ed. Salahuddin (Delhi, 1980), p. 91 (Qamber, *The Last*, pp. 74-5). Kanpuri describes Ismat as wearing an extravagantly wide-bottomed white pajama and a light gray *dupatta* as well as several black glass bangles on his wrists (*Yâd-i-Ayyâm*, p. 90).

The spectacle of a man pretending to be a woman, stylized gestures and all, was doubtlessly highly entertaining to an exclusively male audience. But, it was only a *temporary* act. Outside of a musha'irah or other such gatherings, no rekhti poet is reported to have gone around usually dressed as a woman or behaving in any allegedly 'effeminate' manner. On the contrary, the rekhti poets' friends and chroniclers often make a point of describing them as outstandingly 'manly' men in their bearing. We are told that these poets were fierce Pathans, or professional soldiers, or expert in the use of arms.<sup>51</sup> More significantly, it appears that all rekhti poets were heterosexual males. No rekhti poet is reported in the tazkiras to have been a homosexual, though the homosexual orientation of several other poets is casually mentioned, without any prejudice.<sup>52</sup> Rangin and Insha do not adopt special female names as their *takallus*. In fact, many a time these rekhti poets depict themselves, in the *maqta'* or the signature verse, as the possible male lovers of their female protagonists.<sup>53</sup> Jan Sahib and Naznin, who adopt what would be considered an 'effeminate' *takallus*, are emphatically described as being tough Afghans. Being totally 'effeminate' was then not a cherished quality or an approved persona in Urdu culture.

<sup>51</sup> Nassakh (*Suḡan*, p. 194) on Rangin; Sabir (*Gulistân-i Suḡan*, p. 444) and Beg (*Dihlî Kî Âkiri Şam'*, p. 75) on Naznin; Agha Haidar Hasan (Jan Sahib, *Divân*, p. 42) on Jan Sahib. Rangin himself took great pride in how he and his brother were trained for soldiery by their father (Khan, *Sa'âdat Yâr*, p. 37).

<sup>52</sup> See C. M. Naim, 'The Theme of Homosexual (Pederastic) Love in Pre-Modern Urdu Poetry,' (included in this collection). Also, Tariq Rahman, 'Boy-Love in the Urdu Ghazal,' in *Annual of Urdu Studies*, no. 7 (1990), pp. 1-20.

<sup>53</sup> Two examples will suffice: (1) '*kat paḡhne ko dyorhî ke ûpar çâhiye ko'î bûrhâ sâ // inşâ' to hai haṭṭâ-kattâ hai ye dogâna bâṭ kudhab*,' 'We need someone old to read letters at the door, but Insha is a burly youth. That makes it very difficult, dear friend.[to get him near us].' (2) '*bholî samajh na mujh-ko, suntâ hai jân sâhab // aisî nahîṇ hûṇ nanhî â'ûṇ jo tere dam meṇ*,' 'Don't think I'm naive, Jan Sahib. Listen, I'm not that young that you can fool me.'

(And that is still the case.) Had there been a poet so utterly 'effeminate', the sight of him would have been entertaining enough, but no patron or audience would have felt comfortable having any sustained interaction with him—their 'masculinity' would have been threatened. It is also possible that they would not have found his company that rewarding, for, in any such instance, they would have found themselves laughing merely at the individual before them, and not at one half of the humanity, as they could through the so-called 'feminine' verses of the otherwise very manly men.

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In the title of this essay I asked the question: are the rekhtis in Urdu transvestic words? Before offering an answer I should perhaps first explain what the term 'transvestic' means to me. Here I depend on the definition proposed by Madeline Kahn in her study of the 18th century English novel. 'A transvestite,' she writes, 'is a man who dresses temporarily and periodically as a woman. He is not a transsexual who wants to *be* a woman and who today can be one, through surgery. Neither is he, generally, a homosexual. He is a heterosexual man who reaffirms his masculinity by dressing as a woman. In that dress, he does not become a woman; he becomes a man who is hiding his penis beneath his skirt.'<sup>54</sup>

It is in the above sense, I think, that we can regard most rekhtis—in particular the rekhtis of four of the major poets, Qais, Rangin, Insha, and Jan Sahib—to be quintessentially transvestic. Rekhti poets temporarily adopt a woman's voice, but they never stop being the men they are. In fact, most of them explicitly revert to their male selves in the *maqta*'s, often in a hyper-masculine manner. They may pretend to look at women and themselves through a woman's eyes, but they mostly see what their masculine and heterosexual selves

<sup>54</sup> Madeline Kahn, *Narrative Transvestism: Rhetoric and Gender in the 18th Century English Novel* (Ithaca, 1991), p. 13 (emphasis in the original). It is a somewhat 'simplistic' formulation, as Kahn herself describes it, but it is useful enough for my purpose. My understanding of the rekhti owes much to Kahn's insightful book.

desire. No wonder the histories of the rekhti mention no more than a couple of names of women poets, all courtesans or concubines, who were no less an object of entertainment to their male patrons than the paltry verses they doubtlessly wrote for the men's added pleasure. And it is this truth about the rekhti that speaks out so bluntly in a couplet by Jan Sahib, arguably the best of all rekhti poets:

*qadr kyâ nâ-mard jâneñ, mardu'e jo mard haiñ*  
*jân sâhab, qâd hote haiñ vahî sunkar mujhe*  
 'Non-males' can't appreciate my verse, Jan Sahib;  
 It only pleases the men who are really 'males.'

## Yes, The Poem Itself\*

In 1960 Stanley Burnshaw showed us a way to bring English speaking readers face to face with a poem written in a foreign language, to make it possible for them to experience it in the original, to see *what* the poem was saying and *how*, returning always to that indivisible, 'unparaphraseable totality' of the work itself.<sup>1</sup> What Burnshaw offered in his book concerns both translators and teachers of foreign literatures, especially those of us who teach a foreign literature at some level through English translations.

Poetry is memorable. Valery considered it a very important quality of poetry, as opposed to prose, that it tends to reproduce itself in recall. In other words, the structural cohesiveness of even ordinary poetry is stronger than that of ordinary prose. Even without the crutches of metrical rhythm and predictable rhyme, poetry is easily memorized because there are always other purely linguistic features, subtle micro-level linguistic devices, that force themselves ever so gently on our memory and demand that they be reproduced unchanged whenever we recall the poem. And it is these features that make a poem an indivisible blend of form and content, a totally integrated, cohesive structure.

It is a truism to say that in good poetry there is no separate 'experience' that a poem 'describes,' that the poem itself is the experience, but how often do we succeed in getting a student to share that experience with the poet? We certainly

\* Revised. Originally appeared in *Literature East and West*, 15:1 (March 1971), pp. 7-16.

<sup>1</sup> Stanley Burnshaw (Ed.), *The Poem Itself* (New York, 1960).

have little chance of doing that if we substitute an English poem for the original. Burnshaw's method is the one most likely to bring success, though I suggest that it can be further elaborated on the lines indicated below.

Lexical difficulties and cultural gaps may require the teacher to indulge in certain prosaic tasks of exposition, paraphrasing, and etymology, but it is imperative that he should not neglect to point out to the student the structural cohesiveness of the poem in the original, the linguistic features that make it a memorable, unified whole. Having spelled out these structural features and having shown their function (which is also their meaning) in the poem, the teacher should ask the student to read the text in the original and seek to let the unity of the poetic experience reveal itself to him.

In what follows I shall try to discuss the structural features of two pieces of Urdu poetry, one a *nazm*, the other a *ghazal*. These are by two young contemporary poets, who may be considered to possess an original voice, though neither of them would feel comfortable if given the epithets of 'master' and 'trend-setter.'<sup>2</sup> Furthermore, these two pieces are not by any means their best compositions. I choose them because I happen to be reading them and think they are fairly good examples of what the younger poets are trying to do. Also, I believe that a study of literature should not be confined to masterpieces, certainly not in the case of contemporary literature. Given the facts of Urdu literary milieu in which poetry is read before large and varied groups, in which many common philosophical, ethical, political views are made public through the medium of poetry, it is perhaps necessary that one should stray from masterpieces once in a while. It is not my intention here to explain what these poems 'mean'; I am merely going to point out certain linguistic features which

<sup>2</sup> The two poets. Shahryar and Bashir Badr, were indeed young when the essay was originally written in 1966 for a seminar at Aligarh. No longer young, they have certainly lived up to their impressive beginnings.

serve to keep the unity of the poetic experience intact and retrievable.

The following is the text, in transcription, and word for word translation, of the *nazm*, which is a poem with a title and with a linear, dramatic progression, as opposed to a ghazal, which has neither.<sup>3</sup>

### *Wâpsî* (The Return)

- 1.— *yahân kyâ hai birahna tîrgî hai*  
here what? is naked darkness is
- 2.— *kalâ hai âhaṭṭṭ haiṭ taṣṇagî hai*  
vacuum is sounds are thirst is
- 3.— *yahân jis-ke lie âe the vo ṣai*  
here for which [we] had come that thing
- 4.— *kisî qîmat pa bhî miltî nahîṭ hai*  
any price at even available not is
- 5.— *jo apne sâth ham lâe the vo bhî*  
which with ourselves we had brought that too
- 6.— *yahîṭ khojâegâ gar kî na jaldi*  
right here will be lost if [we] didn't hurry
- 7.— *ṣalo jaldi ṣalo apne makân-ke*  
let's go quickly let's go our house's
- 8.— *kivâṭṭon-kî jabîṭ-par sabt hogî*  
doors' on the forehead fixed will be
- 9.— *ko'î dastak abhî bite dinon-kî*  
some knock immediately passed days'

The following is a close rendering in English.

### The Return

- 1.— What's here? A naked darkness.
- 2.— A vacuum; rustling sounds; a thirst.
- 3.— What we had come to seek

<sup>3</sup> The poem '*Wâpasî*' by Shahryar is from his first collection, *Ism-i-A'zam* (Aligarh, 1965).



- 4.— Here, is not found at any price.
- 5.— We'll lose even what we brought
- 6.— Here, if we do not hurry.
- 7.— Hurry! Let's go! For there will be,
- 8.— Branded on our door's forehead,
- 9.— A knock of the days just gone.

Structurally the poem has two parts: the first six lines make one composite part, the last three the other. The first line begins with *yahân*, 'here,' which is repeated at the beginning of the third and whose variant *yahîn*, 'at this very place,' occurs at the beginning of the sixth. The repetition of this word not only gives an effect of unity to the six lines but also localizes the experience. We are concerned with the here and now, and the six lines curl back to answer the question asked in the beginning: *yahân kyâ hai?*, 'What is here?' That question requires nouns and noun phrases in its answer, and we find a number of them in the first two lines: *birahna tîrgî*, 'naked darkness'; *kalâ*, 'vacuum'; *âhaṭen*, 'vague sounds suggesting some presence'; *taṣnagî*, 'thirst.' The first two lines also rhyme, and that rhyme is half echoed in the fourth line. The positive statements of the first two lines are opposed by a negative statement begun in the third and concluded in the fourth, and the use of *nahîn*, 'no; not,' in its particular position—as a quasi rhyme—helps make that opposition. A similarly effective word order is evident in the opposition of the two *vos*, 'it; that,' in the third and the fifth. Also to be noted is the phonetic similarity but semantic opposition of the phrases *jis-ke lie âe the*, 'for which we had come.' and *sâth ham lâe the*, '[that which] we had brought with us.'

The sixth line closes the first part of the poem, but its structure suggests not only the end of the first part but also the beginning of the second. There is a sharp break in the sixth line, emphasized by putting together in the middle the two syllables, *-gâ* and *gar*; this conjunction forces the reader to make here a distinct pause. But the remaining line reads at a fast pace and enhances the sense of urgency being conveyed.

The effect is re-enforced by repeating the word *jaldi*, 'hurry; haste, quickly.' Furthermore, the position of the repeated words helps connect the two parts of the poem.

In the second part, the seventh and the eighth lines are structurally very closely linked: the seventh ends in the post-position *-ke*, 'of,' which is grammatically irrevocably linked with the first word of the eighth, *kivāron*, 'doors' (*kivāron-ke*, 'of the doors'; the 'doors' are plural because Indian doors generally have two flaps). This leaves the last line, the ninth, in complete isolation. I shall refer to that fact again later, but first let us make note of the lovely phonetic (onomatopoeic?) effect of the word *sabt*, 'inscribed; fixed (like a seal),' in the eighth. While the preceding noun *jabîñ*, 'forehead,' evokes in our minds the figure of a human, or at least a living being, the fully stressed placement of *sabt* not only evokes the memory of the old practice of using a seal or a brand to indicate someone's authoritative presence or power, but also creates a distinctly striking phonetic effect which can be said to anticipate the word *dastak*, 'knock,' in the ninth line. In other words, simultaneously with reviving in our minds its historical connotations, this word resounds in our ears as if we have ourselves just heard 'the passing days' knock.' The effect is immediate. But what proves to be more interesting is the fact mentioned earlier: the perfect isolation of the last line. Grammatically, this line is a noun phrase; and structurally, it ends the poem perfectly, for as a noun phrase it answers the question posed in the opening line of the poem, *yahân kyâ hai*, 'What is here?' The circle is now complete. The question asked at the beginning is given an added dimension by the answer in the last line. The feeling—despite the title *vâpsî*, 'the return'—that there really was no movement in time or place is given support by this structural device just as much as by the repeated use of *yahân* in the first part and the choice of an abstract noun for the title. The poet's concern is with the experience *after the return* and not *while returning*.

A ghazal usually does not show the same kind of 'unity' as a *nazm*, and if it does we call it either a *qit'a* or a *ghazal-i-musalsal* (a continuous ghazal). In a ghazal, each couplet is considered a separate entity, and the only expected unity is of meter and rhyme. But that should not mean that each couplet must always be looked upon exclusively as a discrete poetic experience in itself, without reference to other couplets in the ghazal. One can also ask: what makes a poet write a certain number of couplets in a given meter and rhyme-scheme, and then put them in a certain order to form a ghazal? Of course, in many instances the answer would refer to the needs of the context in which a ghazal is usually presented, i.e. the context of a *musha'irah*, where it would be helpful to begin with a good couplet and let a bad one ride on the applause of the first one. Similarly, the practice of reading or reciting the first line of a couplet twice before delivering the 'conclusion' in the second also perhaps influences the arrangement of ideas and words within a couplet. There is certainly never a line-by-line dramatic progression in a ghazal, and the remark that a ghazal is a 'string of pearls at random strung' is not far off the mark in that sense. On the other hand, there may often be very noticeable thematic relationships between the various couplets, or, in the case of more than one theme being employed, a relationship between the various themes. The ghazal tradition is a thousand years old; this genre of poetry has been most popular in Arabic, Persian, Turkish, and Urdu literatures; and there is an immensely rich body of conventions which are used by poets to achieve a remarkable degree of brevity and terseness in their individual couplets.

The following is the text, in transcription, and word for word translation of the ghazal.<sup>4</sup>

- 1.— *kuf̤ta*      *şajar laraz-uṭhe*    *jaise ki*    *dar-ga'e*  
           sleeping trees    shivered    as if      were scared

<sup>4</sup> The ghazal is by Bashir Badr, as it first appeared in the monthly *Talâṣ* (April, 1963), p. 68.

- kuch cāndnī-ke phūl zamīn-par bikhār-ga'e*  
 some moonlight's flowers on the ground scattered
- 2.— *śīse-kā tāj sar-pa rakhe ā-rahī thī rāt*  
 crystal's crown on the head placed was coming night  
*ṭakrāī ham-se cānd sitāre bikhār-ga'e*  
 collided with us moon stars scattered
- 3.— *vo kṣk hont ret-se nam māṅgte-rahe*  
 those dry lips from sand moisture kept begging for  
*jin-kī talās-men ka'ī daryā guzar-ga'e*  
 whose in search several rivers passed by
- 4.— *cāhā thā main-ne cānd-kī palkon-ko cūm-lūn*  
 had desired I moon's eye-lashes [I] may kiss  
*mere labon-pa subh-ke tāre bikhār-ga'e*  
 my on lips morning's stars scattered
- 5.— *talvon-pa narm dhūp-ne jab gudgudī sī ki*  
 on soles soft sunshine when sort of tickled  
*āṅkhon-men so'e cāndnī-ke kvāb dar-ga'e*  
 in the eyes asleep moonlight's dreams were scared
- 6.— *jin-par likhī huī thī muhabbat-kī dāstān*  
 on which was written love's long tale  
*wo cāk-cāk purze havā-men bikhār-ga'e*  
 those torn-torn chits in the wind scattered

The following is a close rendering in English.

- 1.— Slumbering trees shivered, as if frightened.  
     Some moonlight flowers scattered on the ground.
- 2.— The night was coming, a crystal crown on her head.  
     It ran into us—the moon and stars were scattered.
- 3.— They kept begging for moisture from sand, those dry lips,  
     In whose search several rivers passed through here.
- 4.— I had sought to kiss the moon's eyelids,  
     But stars of dawn were scattered on my lips.
- 5.— When the soft sunlight tickled my soles,  
     The dreams of moonlight, asleep in my eyes, were frightened.
- 6.— On which was written the long tale of my love,  
     Those shredded pieces were scattered in the wind.

We immediately notice that the poet has used only three different rhyme-words (instead of a possible seven), of which one (*bikhar-ga'e*, 'scattered; got scattered') has been used four times, another (*dar-ga'e*, 'were scared') twice, and the remaining (*guzar-ga'e*, 'passed by') only once. The first two of these words occur in the opening couplet itself, which is further marked by the occurrence of the syllable *-ar* in several other words whose sonority adds to the total effect. But the most important thing to note about the first couplet is the opening sequence of an adjective and a noun, *kuf̣ta sajar*, 'sleeping trees,' both of them being relatively uncommon words borrowed from Persian and Arabic, respectively. The sequence stands out from the rest of the couplet, in fact jars on our ears, and in that way forces itself on our attention and startles us in the same way the poet might have been startled in his reverie by the sudden trembling of trees and the scattering of the 'flowers of moonlight' on the ground. The closest synonym *sote* lacks the sharp resounding quality of the two short syllables of *kuf̣ta*.

In the second couplet, the image of a collision is structurally supported by the placement of the word *takrâi* at the beginning of the second line. The placement, at regular intervals, of four fully stressed words (*tâj*, *rakhe*, *rahî*, *rât*) in the first line makes us expect a similar, slow and regular beat in the second, but we are jolted out of this expectation by the full stress placed on its very first word.

One may rightfully say that the third couplet is the most 'impersonal' of all the couplets in this ghazal; significantly, it also contains the only *radîf* (end-rhyme), *guzar-ga'e*, that is not part of the main experience, as we shall see later.

Both the lines of the fourth couplet have a suggestion of alliteration, though of different consonantal sounds. In the first line the prominent sound is the palatal *ç*, in the second, the labial *b*. I am not suggesting that these two particular sounds complement each other, but I do wish to point out that the two lines seem to complement each other structurally in the

placement of the alliterative words. Imagine how poor the couplet would sound if the second line were: *honton-pa mere anjum-i-sahrî bikhar-ga'e*.

A similar placement of key words is noticeable in the two lines of the fifth couplet, but in this case one must also underscore the fact that these words contrast in meaning. The three pairs of contrasting words are: *talvon*, 'soles' and *ânkhon*, 'eyes'; *dhûp*, 'sunlight' and *çândnî*, 'moonlight'; and *gud-gudî*, 'tickling' and *dar-ga'e*, 'were scared.'

As for the last couplet, it seems of little consequence by itself, but viewed within the context of the entire ghazal it takes on an entirely new role.

Let us look at the entire ghazal from a different angle. It opens with the description of a natural phenomenon, of something exterior to the poet. The first couplet contains no mention of the poet himself; it also fails to tell us what caused the trees to tremble in fear and the 'moon-flowers' to scatter on the ground. In the second couplet the poet uses a first person pronominal form, but in the plural, which is still a step removed from the purely 'personal' singular form. One may add that he could have used the proper singular form, *mujh*, with no harm to the meter, but in fact he did not. We have already pointed out the 'impersonal' nature of the third couplet; we can add that the use of a third person pronominal form, *vo*, enhances that feeling. But a change occurs with the fourth couplet: the journey that began from the very external reaches the very internal and personal. Now the poet uses a first person singular form, and we would not be fair to him if we neglect to note the fact. He could have easily used a plural form, e.g. in the following manner: *çâhâ thâ ham-ne çând-kî palkon-ko çûm-len*. But he did not. However, after reaching the intimacy of the first person, the direction of the poetic experience is reversed. The fifth couplet contains no explicit mention of the poet's 'I,' though the experience is still quite personal. It is the poet whose 'soles are tickled by the sun' and whose 'dreams of moonlight' are frightened. And then

comes the sixth couplet, which concludes the ghazal as well as the poet's experience; we are informed of the destruction and scattering of something that had contained the story of the poet's love. Notice the curious coincidence: the end-rhyme of the first of the two concluding couplets is the same as that in the first line of the *matla*', the opening couplet, while the end-rhyme of the last couplet is the same as that of the second line. This establishes a kind of identity between the strictly external, natural 'happening' described in the opening couplet and the more personal experience of the subsequent couplets. The last couplet also gives us the 'agent' or the cause of that 'happening.' It was the wind that moved through the dark trees and caused them to tremble as if in fear, and it was their sudden movement that caused confusion among the patches of moonlight on the ground. The wind, *havâ*, was an important element in this particular experience, and could not be entirely pushed away in the background. Viewed in this manner, the ghazal takes on the appearance of something other than a 'necklace of pearls at random strung.' It has a pattern. There exists a structural relationship between its various couplets and a sense to their arrangement. It was inspired by just one poetic experience, which itself is now this ghazal.

### Postscript

Analyses of the above kind add a different dimension to our appreciation of a poem, and allow us to become more closely aware of that poem as a structurally well-integrated poetic experience. And yet we should beware of regarding them as describing some actual experience. They may, or they may not. An analysis like the above can quickly lose much of its force in the case of a ghazal, as I realised a few years after publishing the above essay.

My analysis of Bashir Badr's ghazal was based on the text he published in a magazine in 1963. Six years later he pub-

lished his first collection, *Ikâ'î* ('Singularity');<sup>5</sup> it included this ghazal, but now with some changes and three additional couplets. First the changes:

1. In the fourth couplet, the second line now read: *hontōn-pa mere subh-ke târe bikhar-ga'e*. The meaning is not changed at all. The change lies in replacing the Persian *lab*, 'lip,' with its Indic synonym, *hont*, and thus bringing the diction of the second line closer to that of the first. Or, more likely, the change was made to avoid repetition, since the new next couplet begins with that very phrase. (See below.)

2. Two changes were made in what was earlier the fifth couplet. (1) *talvōn-pa* was changed to *talvōn-men*, thus correcting the earlier error of the idiom. And (2), *âṅkhon-men*, 'in the eyes,' in the second line was changed to *palkon-pa*, 'on the eyelashes.' A different image, and perhaps more 'tender' and/or 'sensitive'—eyelashes culturally being viewed as more light and vulnerable than eyes. (Likewise, being 'on' can be felt to be more *exposed* than being 'in' or 'inside.')

These changes do not take anything away from the earlier analysis. But the poet has also added three new couplets, placing one after the original fourth, and the remaining two after the original fifth. These are as follows. (The numbering below indicates the couplets' placement in the new ghazal of nine.)

5.— *mere labon-pa cānd-kī qāṣen laraz-ga'īn*  
       on my lips        moon's slices    trembled  
*âṅkhon-pa jaise rāt-ke gesū bikhar-ga'e*  
       on the eyes    as if    night's tresses    scattered

A close rendering in English would be: 'Slivers of the moon trembled on my lips. // It was as if the night's tresses were let loose over my eyes.'

<sup>5</sup> Bashir Badr, *Ikâ'î* (Aligarh, 1969), p. 84.



- 7.— *sâhil-pa*      *ruk-ga'e the*      *zarâ der-ke lie*  
 on the shore [we; I] had stopped for just a brief while  
*âñkhoñ-se*   *dil-meñ*      *kitne*      *samandar*   *utar-ga'e*  
 through eyes in the heart how many oceans settled

A close rendering in English would be: 'I stopped for barely a moment on the shore; even then many oceans sank through my eyes into the heart.'

- 8.— *pâyâ*      *jo*   *muskurâte hu'e,*   *kah-uñhî*      *bahâr*  
 [it found us] when smiling,      exclaimed Spring  
*jo zañm*      *pichle sâl*   *lagâ'e the*      *bhar-ga'e*  
 the wounds which last year [I] had caused have healed

A close rendering in English would be: 'When it caught me smiling, Spring exclaimed, "The wounds I left on you last year, have they [already] healed?"' (Spring time, traditionally, is the time of greatest hardship for lovers who, again traditionally, must remain separated from their beloveds. The healing of the wounds would indicate that the wounds were not too deep due to some condemnable lack in the lover's passion.)

Frankly, I find the first additional couplet not worthy of the poet, and the third too conventional for this ghazal—a poetic anachronism. The poet would have done better by leaving them out. The second addition (No. 7 above) was certainly good enough to be retained by the poet; I cannot fault him for it. Its inclusion, of course, destroys much of my marvellous analysis, but there is nothing I can do about it.

## The Ghazal Itself: Translating Ghalib\*

For centuries, the ghazal has been a major genre of poetry in Arabic, Persian, Turkish, and Urdu. A ghazal usually consists of five or more couplets, sharing meter and rhyme. The rhyme itself may be in two parts: the *qavâfi* (sing., *qâfiya*), which are structurally similar words with rhyming final syllables, followed by the *radîf*, which forms a fixed rhyme consisting of one or more words. Not every ghazal contains a *radîf*, but every ghazal must have a unifying set of *qavâfi*. The opening couplet has rhymes in both lines. Subsequent couplets rhyme only in the second line, hence the common rhyme scheme of a ghazal: *a a, b a, c a, d a, e a*, etc. The final couplet of a ghazal may contain the pen name [*takallus*] of the poet. Fundamentally, each couplet in a ghazal is a distinct and organic unit of thought, not necessarily linked in any way to the other couplets except in meter and rhyme. In the ghazal discussed below, the *qavâfi* are *adâ, hayâ, hinâ, kyâ, vafâ*, and *kudâ*, and the *radîf* is *hai*.

Mirza Asadullah Khan Ghalib was born in Agra in 1797, six years before the British took over Agra and Delhi. Son of a mercenary soldier, he was orphaned at a young age. Raised by an uncle, he received the usual instruction and care, and was married into a wealthier family in Delhi when he was thirteen (his bride was eleven). The rest of his life was spent mostly in Delhi, except for a short but significant stay in Calcutta, then the capital city. His source of income was mainly a small share in his uncle's pension from the British, supplemented by the irregular patronage that came to him from the last Mughal king of Delhi, and

\* Revised. Originally appeared in *The Yale Journal of Criticism*, vol. 5, no. 3 (1992), pp. 219–232. It is offered to Azra Raza and Sara Suleri, two lovers of Ghalib.

the Nawabs of Rampur and Oudh. He is believed to have completed a volume of Urdu ghazals by the time he was nineteen, but the collection, highly abridged by Ghalib himself, first appeared in 1841. Ghalib was also a noteworthy poet in Persian, and for a considerable period of time wrote only in that language. In either language, his favourite genre was the ghazal. Contrary to the general practice in his day, Ghalib did not have a mentor [*ustâd*] in the art of poetry, though he himself had a considerable number of disciples [*sâgird*].

Once Ghalib was asked if he made a list of rhymes or followed some earlier master's ghazal when he wrote his own. Ghalib replied, 'You think I'm like other poets who add strings of words to rhymes? God forbid! A curse on me if ever I do that. I merely note the meter and the rhyme, then start writing [whatever sort of verse I wish to write] in that particular *zamîn* [meter and rhyme pattern; lit., ground or earth]. . . . My friend, poetry doesn't mean chasing rhymes [*qâfiya-paimâ'î*] ; poetry is the art of creating "meanings" [*ma'ni-âfirînî*].'<sup>1</sup>

It is also characteristic of Ghalib that when he was housebound in Delhi for fifteen months during the Great Indian Mutiny of 1857, he arbitrarily chose to write his journal in archaic Persian, avoiding Arabic words. Then, being a true poet in the terms of his times, he published the journal himself and, together with a panegyric, sent a copy to Queen Victoria, expecting to be made her poet laureate. He received only a terse note of thanks from a secretary.

In 1969, the centenary year of Ghalib's death was observed in the United States, where the most interesting homage was a book, *Ghazals of Ghalib*.<sup>2</sup> It was a collaboration between a Pakistani/Urdu poet and scholar—Aijaz Ahmad—and a number of American poets – W. S. Merwin, Adrienne Rich, William Stafford, David Ray, Thomas Fitzsimmons, Mark Strand and William Hunt. Ahmad selected thirty-seven ghazals out of the 237 in

<sup>1</sup> *Kutûb-i-Ghalib*, ed. Malik Ram (Aligarh, 1962), p. 84; letter no. 95 to Mirza Tufta.

<sup>2</sup> *Ghazals of Ghalib*, ed. Aijaz Ahmad (New York, 1971). Prof. Ahmad taught English Literature at Rutgers University at the time.

the common edition, and reduced them to five couplets each. He prepared prose translations and notes for his collaborators, and held detailed discussions with them. The American poets then produced their own poetic 'versions.' Not all the poets worked on all the ghazals, nor did they observe the same degree of fidelity to the originals. Ahmad chose to publish all the available versions: he aimed not to produce English translations but to bring about a creative encounter between Ghalib and contemporary American poets.<sup>3</sup>

The five couplets I discuss below belong to a ghazal included in Ahmad's selection (Ghazal XXI; pp. 97–104). A typical Ghalibean ghazal, it also has an interesting history. Ghalib wrote it before he was nineteen. In the earliest manuscript, considered to be an autograph, it has seven couplets, with one more added in the margin. Much later, when Ghalib published his highly selective collection, this ghazal appeared with eleven couplets, four of which were new. Ghalib discarded one of the original couplets, kept the remaining seven with some changes, and added four new ones. That, for him, did not effect the integrity of his ghazal. Ghazal is an open-ended poem; it can be reduced or expanded by the poet at any time. And the same privilege may readily be exercised by any anthologizer.

The five couplets will be presented here in a format adapted from Stanley Burnshaw's *The Poem Itself*.<sup>4</sup> In each instance, first

<sup>3</sup> In that regard Ahmad's project was different from another, also sponsored by the Asia Society a few years earlier, that involved Vidya Niwas Misra and such American poets as Josephine Miles, Martin Halpern and Leonard Nathan, and produced *Modern Hindi Poetry: An Anthology*, ed. V. N. Misra (Bloomington, 1967). Ahmad's project's success is evident in the fact that Adrienne Rich went on to write at least two sets of 'ghazals' of her own in English. See Adrienne Rich, *Poems: Selected and New, 1950–1974* (New York, 1975), pp. 120–128, 152–155.

<sup>4</sup> *The Poem Itself*, ed. Stanley Burnshaw (New York, 1960). The book's associate editors are: Dudley Fitts, Henri Peyre, and John F. Nims. It presents 150 original French, German, Italian, Portuguese, and Spanish poems by 45 modern poets, with literal renderings and explanatory discussions. For me it was an exciting experience to read the book and try to use its insights in my work as a teacher and a translator. Two small books of my similar efforts with

the Urdu couplet appears in a transcription. Next comes a somewhat free prose translation. To give the reader a more intimate sense of the original, the third section serially lists and translates individual words and phrases. Each line is also separately translated. The fourth section explains the more unusual conventions and points out certain rhetorical features—in other words, provides the kind of information an educated Urdu reader/listener would bring to the verse. Lastly, the transcriptionised Urdu verse is reprinted, with the expectation that the reader will now be in a position to get some pleasure from it directly. In two cases, a sixth section has been added to discuss Aijaz Ahmad's 'versions' of those couplets.

## I

## THE COUPLET

*sabnam ba gul-i-lâla na kâlî za adâ hai*  
*dâg-i-dil-i- be-dard nazargâh-i-hayâ hai*

## PROSE TRANSLATION

The dew on the tulip is charming; it is also for a purpose. A cruel heart, when itself scarred, should be embarrassed to tears.

## LEXICON

*sabnam*: dew.

*ba gul-i-lâla*: on the tulip flower. In contemporary Urdu, *lâla* also refers to the common poppy flower. In either case, the flower is deep red, with a distinctive black centre.

*na kâlî za adâ hai*: is not devoid of *adâ*.

*adâ*: coquetry; charm; elegance; style. A word full of nuances, it implies self-awareness or design in any act.

First line: 'The dewdrop on the tulip flower is not without *adâ*.

*dâg-i-dil-i-be-dard*: lit., the scar on a painless [i.e. pitiless] heart.

*nazargâh*: lit., the place where a glance should fall. Object of perception; deserving notice and response.

*hayâ*: modesty; a sense of shame.

Second line: 'The scar on the heart of a pitiless person must be touched by modesty and shame.'

## EXPLICATION

The first line makes a specific, descriptive statement; the second interprets and universalizes.

The tulip conventionally represents both the beloved's beauty and lack of compassion or pity.

In Urdu idiom, one sign of acute shame is heavy perspiration. In English one says, 'shamed to tears'; in Urdu, one 'becomes water, perspires heavily.' Hence the dew on the tulip expresses its shame. The charming dewdrop on the tulip is there for a reason: the flower has the colour and the shape of a heart but cannot feel any emotion; hence, it is pitiless. Should it not then sometimes feel ashamed of itself?

In the second line, the focus is more on the 'scar' (the dark centre) than on the 'heart' (the red flower). If the flower could not feel, it should have no scar. Therefore, the scar must have been forced upon it. How shameful!

The dew enhances the tulip's beauty, just as any display of modesty on the part of the beloved would only make her charms more devastating.

To summarize: the first line presents a concrete image; the second offers an explanation for something that ordinarily does not need one. The tightly constructed lines contain a number of words that form a network of associations. There are some ambiguities, also a parataxis that depends for its effect on our knowledge of the way in which classical Urdu ghazals are contextualized.

## THE COUPLET ITSELF

*şabnam ba gul-i-lâla na kâlî za adâ hai*  
*dâg-i-dil-i-be-dard nazargâh-i-hayâ hai*

### ‘VERSIONS’

This couplet is included in Ahmad’s selection. Here is his prose version:

The dewdrop on the red poppy is not without end/function/meaning:  
The spot on the heart of her who is cruel is a place where shame has  
come (to pass).

In his explanatory notes, Ahmad adds:

Lala: Red poppy, or tulip. The Indian poppy is smaller than the Western variety and, with the poetic license which is common in Urdu, one could imply that a dewdrop is sufficient to cover the black that lies at the heart of the flower. Matters are further complicated by the fact that, in the highly stylized language of nineteenth-century Urdu poetry, it is used as a metaphor for the heart, or for the eye. If the heart, it is a bleeding heart, like Shelley’s. If the eye, always that of a woman who has been crying (eyes are therefore red). Thus, dewdrop on a red poppy could be tears in the bloodshot eyes of a woman.

Ahmad, I believe, makes two errors. First, he transfers the contemporary meaning of a word to an earlier period, and to a poet who prided himself on his Central Asian heritage. *Lâla* in the classical tradition only means ‘tulip’; even Iqbal uses the word in that sense alone. Ahmad’s second error takes him far in an interesting direction: he asserts that *lâla* may be a metaphor for the eye—particularly that of a woman who has been crying. Nothing in the lexicons or the traditions of Urdu poetry justifies this interpretation. ‘Tulip-face’ or ‘tulip-cheeks’ are fairly common, but no ‘tulip-eyes.’ For example, such a construction is not found in that fascinating book, *Mustalahât-al-Su‘râ* (The Lexicon of Poets), a great favourite of Ghalib’s.

But is this really a serious mistake? Where does it lead? In an additional note, Ahmad explains:

The poppy is the heart, the function of the dew is to hide the blemish. However, dew is again a metaphor for tears. Where do these tears come from? We come to the other metaphorical meaning of the

poppy: the eye. The meaning of the metaphor becomes clear. If the poppy is also the eye, and the dew is tears, then these are the tears the eyes shed in order to make up for, to wash away, to undo the blemish of cruelty. Thus the function of the dew is not only to hide the blemish, but also to make up for it: regaining, or becoming capable of, sympathies even after the denial of love.

The meaning Ahmad gives may be radical, but his method is not. He finds similarity between the eye and the poppy based on colour, and though it remains un-stated, on shape. The dewdrop and tears also share their physical shape and property. In other words, the *logic* that links the dewdrop to a tear of repentance is the same as that which links it to the perspiration of embarrassment. And so we find that the American poets' versions do not destroy the essential *strategy* of the couplet.

Dewdrop on poppy petal  
there for a reason

in that place the cruelty of her heart can be  
concealed only by one of her own tears  
(W. S. Merwin)

There's meaning in the teardrop that blurs the red eye of the poppy:  
the heart that knows its flaw understands the need for concealment.  
(Adrienne Rich)

Dew on a flower—tears, or something:  
hidden spots mark the heart of a cruel woman.  
(William Stafford)

## II

### THE COUPLET

dil kūn-suda-i-kaṣ-ma-kaṣ-i-hasrat-i-didār  
ā'ina ba-dast-i-but-i-bad-mast hinâ hai



## PROSE TRANSLATION

The heart strove to gain a vision of the beloved, but, unsuccessful, turned to blood. The beloved, mirror in hand, remained transfixed in her place, intoxicated with her own beauty.

## LEXICON

*dil*: heart.

*kūn-suda*: bloodied; become blood.

*kaṣ-ma-kaṣ*: struggle; dilemma; lit., pull-not-pull.

*hasrat*: longing; unfulfilled desire.

*didār*: sight; vision; appearance.

First line: 'The heart [has] become blood from the tussle caused by the longing for a sight [of the beloved].'

*ā'ina*: mirror.

*ba-dast-i*: in the hand of...

*but*: lit., idol; metaphorically, the beloved.

*bad-mast*: intoxicated, amorous.

*but-i-bad-mast*: the beautiful, intoxicated beloved.

*hinā*: henna. Women use its paste to stain their hands and feet.

One must, of course, remain immobile while the paste dries.

*hai*: is.

Second line: 'The mirror in the hand of the intoxicated beauty is (or acts like) henna.'

## EXPLICATION

I find this couplet fascinating, and difficult to analyze precisely. Its music attracts me. I also note the neat pattern in the two lines: the heart becomes blood, the mirror becomes henna. (Of course, the colour similarity between blood and henna is obvious.) Finally, I recall that, for Sufis, the heart is a mirror, which must be kept unblemished so that it might reflect the Divine Beloved.

Next, I'm beguiled by the fact that the couplet contains only one verb: *hai*, 'is.' The first word we read is *dil*, a noun; we therefore expect the next word to be its predicative complement, but it turns into a long adjectival phrase. We then expect *ā'ina* to be the complement, but again our expectation is frustrated: what

follows *â'îna* is not a verb but another long adjectival phrase. That suggests a possible parallelism between the two lines until we come to the end and suddenly find a noun, *hinâ*, followed by the verb 'is,' which forces us to reconsider the syntactic arrangement. First we think that 'the heart is bloodied,' but then it appears as if 'the bloodied heart is the mirror.' Proceeding further, we are surprised to discover that 'mirror' itself is the subject of the verb: 'the mirror is henna.' And yet ambiguities remain. Consider the following two readings.

Reading A:

First line: 'The heart . . . s bloodied.'

Second line: 'The mirror . . . is henna.'

Reading B:

The two lines together: "The heart, bloodied, a mirror in the hand of the intoxicated beloved, is henna."

The rules of Urdu syntax may be unambiguous, but the language of poetry keeps creating ambiguities, and we are left with a struggle, or *kaş-ma-kaş*, of our own.

Ghalib's marvellous choice of a word, *kaş-ma-kaş*, both phonetically and graphically reflects what it connotes. Itself formed like a see-saw, it occurs in the exact centre of the first line, balancing its two parts and asserting its own pivotal status. It is derived from *kaşîdan*, a Persian verb with diverse meanings: to draw; attract; prolong; delineate; exhaust; carry; endure; support; experience. Its precise meaning depends on the context, in particular its grammatical object. Here, its object is *hasrat*, 'longing'—the distress or struggle arising out of an unfulfilled desire. But *kaş-ma-kaş* is also related to almost all the key words in the couplet. *Dil*, or 'heart,' is, of course, where the struggle takes place. *Kûn ka şîdan* means 'to draw blood out of something or someone.' The link between *kaşîdan* and *â'îna*, 'mirror,' becomes obvious when we recall that mirrors used to be made of metal and had to be 'scrubbed' or 'scraped' to become and remain reflecting. And let's not forget the Sufis, who burnish their heart/mirror by 'enduring' hardships—e.g. by secluding themselves for 40 days—and 'drawing' sighs of longing for their Be-

loved. Finally, *kaṣ-ma-kaṣ* may even be linked with 'henna,' for henna is made by grinding its leaves, and grinding in Urdu culture is like the word *kaṣ-ma-kaṣ*, back and forth.

Now consider this. The mirror is in the hand of the beloved; like henna, it keeps her transfixed, engrossed in her own beauty, away from the sight of the lover. However, the heart of the lover longs for the beloved, becomes blood, i.e. red, i.e. henna—and, idiomatically, where is the lover's heart except in the beloved's hands? In other words, the more the heart longs the more it causes the beloved to remain transfixed. Further, the beloved is very intoxicated, *bad-mast*. Intoxication implies wine, which in turn is associated (through the verb *kaṣīdan*, 'to distil') with *kaṣ-ma-kaṣ*, 'struggle,' and (through its red colour) with *kūn*, 'blood.' Now heart becomes blood, becomes wine: the suffering that the lover endures becomes the source of the beloved's pleasure.

Why make the neglectful beloved also *bad-mast*? First, it helps generate the above described network of associations. (In their written forms, *ba-dast* and *bad-mast* are almost identical.) Second, it creates a stronger contrast between the two protagonists' states. And finally, its alliteration contributes to the music of the couplet: *ba-dast-i-but-i-bad-mast*.

### THE COUPLET ITSELF

*dil kūn-ṣuda-i-kaṣ-ma-kaṣ-i-hasrat-i-dīdar*  
*ā'īna ba-dast-i-but-i-bad-mast hinā hai*

### III

### THE COUPLET

*qumrī kaf-i-kākistar-o-bulbul qafas-i-rang*  
*ai nāla, niṣān-i-jigar-i-soḳta kyā hai*

### PROSE TRANSLATION

The turtledove is a handful of ashes, the nightingale, a cage of colours. But, o my cry, what sign is left of the heart that was consumed by fire?

## LEXICON

*qumrî*: turtledove. According to poetic convention, it loves the cypress.

*kafî*: palm; handful.

*kâkistar*: ashes.

*bulbul*: nightingale. According to poetic convention, it loves the rose.

*qafas*: cage.

*rang*: colour(s).

First line: 'The turtledove, a handful of ashes; the nightingale, a cage of colours.'

*ai*: O!

*nâla*: a cry or lament.

*nişân*: sign; mark; trace.

*jigar*: lit., liver. In medieval theory, the liver was considered the seat of the soul, whereas the heart was the seat of the life-force. But in poetry the distinction was not rigorously maintained. However, for Ghalib and for us, *jigar* stands for fortitude, courage and enthusiasm, as opposed to *dil*, which is identified with love and empathy.

*sokta*: burnt, consumed.

*kyâ hai*: lit., what is... ?

Second line: 'O cry, what is the sign of a consumed heart?'

## EXPLICATION

The poet, the nightingale and the turtledove are all in love with someone, and their loves consume them. To the poet's mind, the nightingale and turtledove retain some visible trace, whereas he is nothing but an ephemeral cry of anguish. On the other hand, being so totally consumed, is he not superior to the nightingale and turtledove?

The words *qafas-i-rang* create an alliterative effect with *kaf*. They also play upon a conventional phrase, *qafas-i-'unsurî*, 'the elemental cage,' that is, the human body (made of four elements—fire, water, air and dust) within which the soul is 'imprisoned' until it is released in death for eternity. Properly, the

body of the bird enamoured of the colourful rose is called 'a cage of colours.'

Ghalib, when asked to explain this couplet, replied: 'read *juz* (except for) instead of *ai* (O!); the meaning will become clear.' If Ghalib had himself used *juz* instead of *ai*, the line would still be metrically sound: a good example of Ghalib's habit of eliding a few steps from a series, thereby creating suspense and surprise.<sup>5</sup>

### THE COUPLET ITSELF

*qumrī kaf-i-kākistar-o-bulbul qafas-i-rang*  
*ai nāla, niṣān-i-jigar-i-sokṭa kyā hai*

### 'VERSIONS'

Here is Ahmad's prose version:

The dove is merely a handful of ashes and the nightingale a prison of colour;

O my cry, the scar of burnt heart is nothing (in comparison).

In his notes, Ahmad explains the image of *qafas-i-rang* as 'precisely that, a prison of colour. *Not* prisoner. It is somewhat unusual to come across a line which stresses the colour, rather than the sound, of the nightingale.' As a general explanation, he adds, 'In terms of sound, both the dove and the nightingale serve implicitly as metaphors for the poet's cry, or lament; both are singing birds. Visually, they both serve, particularly the dove, as images of the burnt heart.'

'Prison of colour' is indeed unusual, but Ghalib saw no need to explain the image to his perplexed friend. He felt the difficulty lay elsewhere. Ahmad is fascinated by the unusual image and makes sure that its constituents are clearly understood by his American peers. Ghalib's interests go beyond it.

<sup>5</sup> In a letter to Qazi Abdul Jalil, Junun, Ghalib writes, 'In Arabic, both lexical and semantic ellipses are considered faults. In Persian, semantic ellipsis [*ta'qīd-i-ma'navī*] is considered wrong, but lexical ellipsis [*ta'qīd-i-lafẓī*] is not only allowed but is in fact considered rhetorically better [*fasīh*], and adds a touch of piquancy [*malih*] (*Kutūb-i-Qālib*, p. 190).'

The first line consists only of nouns and nominal compounds: 'The turtledove, a handful of ashes; the *bulbul*, a cage of colours.' The words *kaf*, 'handful,' and *qafas*, 'cage,' create a balanced line: they occur as heads of nominal compounds in identical positions within the two halves of the line. They also create assonance. The two compounds' respective second elements further link them: 'ashen' [*kākistar*] is a particular 'colour' [*rang*].

Ghalib's primary aim was to find the *bulbul*'s 'measure' of colour. If *qafas* seemed unusual, so much the better. But was it a radical departure? *Qafas* has a conventional association with the *bulbul*: the bird's fate is to be 'encaged' by a nemesis, the *sayyād*, or 'hunter.' Ghalib makes it inherently caged by its own 'colour.' Further, a trite idiom portrays the human soul as a 'bird' imprisoned in 'the cage of the four elements.'

The second line begins with a vocative: 'O cry!' It poses a question: 'What is the sign of the burnt heart?' Ahmad treats this as a rhetorical question that implies complete negation: there is no sign. Rich's and Stafford's versions concur.

The turtle-dove is a heap of cinders, the nightingale a vivid cage of sounds;

O my cry, you are nothing to these.

(Adrienne Rich)

The dove is a clutch of ashes, nightingale a clench of colour:  
a cry in a scarred, burnt heart, to that, is nothing.

(William Stafford)

But Merwin's version is novel in opposing the burnt-out heart and the cry. He also comes closer to Ghalib's intention by making the cry more substantial. Here is Merwin's version:

The heart is burnt out  
but its sufferings were nothing to yours  
oh my cry

charred dove  
nightingale still burning

Ghalib's protocol required that the poet-lover's passion be supreme; it could in no way be inferior to any metaphor. The classical poet idolized and idealized Love, but simultaneously he idolized and idealized his own particular love. Ghalib could use unusual images but he could not breach the rules of hierarchy, or of his own sense of uniqueness.

Let's look more closely at what Ghalib has tried to do in this couplet. He mentions the two birds but totally suppresses the sound element, an essential part of the convention. Instead, Ghalib underscores their appearance. Only with regard to himself does he mention a sound, a cry. For Ghalib, colours are concrete; sounds are abstract. Given the dichotomy of spirit and body, abstract is superior to concrete. Also, in the tradition, hearing is superior to sight. With reference to the poet-lover, Ghalib introduces two motifs: *nâla*, 'the cry,' and *jigar*, 'the liver.' The liver was believed to be the seat of the soul, and was associated with courage and fortitude. In other words, the motifs in the first line contrast with the motifs in the second and are implied to be inferior.

The second line is a question (rhetorical or otherwise): 'O cry, what's the sign of the burnt-out heart?' In keeping with Ghalib's comment, it could easily have been a flat statement: 'There is no sign . . . except for the cry.' Evidently, Ghalib prefers ambiguity. On the other hand, he leaves the answer staring us in the face. The only trace of the lover's all-consumed heart is an anguished, vanishing cry, while the dove and the *bulbul*, mere metaphors, persist—tangible and colourful, but also inferior.

#### IV

#### THE COUPLET

*majbûrî-o-da 'vâ-i-girafâtârî-i-ulfat*  
*dast-i-tah-i-sang-âmada paimân-i-vafâ hai*

## PROSE TRANSLATION

We have no choice but to love, but we exclaim, 'Love takes us prisoner.' Our hand is caught under a rock, but we say, 'We have made a pact of fidelity.'

## LEXICON

*majbûrî*: helplessness; the state of not having a free will; related to *jabr* (compulsion, force), which is used in opposition to *qadr* (will, authority).

-o: lit., and. Here, a device for juxtaposition.

*da 'vâ*: claim; boast.

*giraftârî*: imprisonment.

*ulfat*: love.

First line: 'Helpless—[yet we] claim to be imprisoned by love.'

*dast*: hand.

*tah-i-sang*: under the rock.

*dast-i-tah-i-sang-âmada*: lit., a hand caught under a rock.

Idiomatically, the state of having no choice and yet claiming to have one, making virtue out of a necessity.

*paimân*: pact.

*vafâ*: fidelity, sincerity.

Second line: '[Our] pact of fidelity is [like] the hand caught under a rock.'

## EXPLICATION

In the first line, a single noun, *majbûrî*, is juxtaposed to a long noun phrase, *da 'vâ-i-giraftârî-i-ulfat*. 'We claim that love took us prisoners [otherwise we would have been free]. Nonsense! We had no choice [but to fall in love, for the beloved is overwhelmingly beautiful, and love is inherent to our nature, as the universal scheme of things exists due to Love].'

The second line contains a long noun phrase, *dast-i-tah-i-sang-âmada*, followed by a short noun phrase, *paimân-i-vafâ*. This reversal of the order in the first line allows two neat patterns for interlinking the various substantives:



Substantive 1 + Substantive 2 (Order)  
 Substantive 1 + Substantive 2

Short Substantive + Long Substantive (Quantity)  
 Long Substantive + Short Substantive

This is one of the eight couplets that Ghalib wrote before the age of nineteen, but its original version differs from what he later published. The changes are revealing. In the original second line, Ghalib had used *dâman*, 'the hem or skirt of an upper garment,' instead of *dast*, 'hand'; and *ahrâm*, 'the simple robes required of Muslim pilgrims during the Hadj,' instead of *paimân*, 'a pact or solemn promise.' The changes did not alter the basic relationship between the two lines: the first presents a state of mind, while the second offers an image and a comment. More significantly, whereas the original words, *dâman* and *ahrâm*, shared only one general attribute (they were associated with clothes), the new words enmesh all of the elements in the couplet.

A formal avowal of sincerity usually required the symbolic gesture of putting one's hand in the hand of the other party. *Paimân* contains the word *pai*, 'foot,' and hands and feet go together in so many ways. *Paimân* also shares a quality with *da'vâ*, 'a claim,' in that both are verbal acts; that was not the case with *ahrâm*. *Dast zîr-i-sang âmadan*, 'hand getting caught under a rock,' is a well-known Persian idiom; the familiar nominal compound makes for a tighter and more fluid expression. *Dast*, 'hand,' is also associated with *giraftârî*, 'being caught,' which is derived from *giraftan*, 'to hold or grab.'

#### THE COUPLET ITSELF

*majbûrî-o-da'vâ-i-giraftârî-i-ulfat*  
*dast-i-tah-i-sang-âmada paimân-i-vafâ hai*

#### V

#### THE COUPLET

*begângî-i-kalq se be-dil na ho Gâlib*  
*ko 'î nahîñ terâ to merî jân kudâ hai*

## PROSE TRANSLATION

Ghalib, don't let the alien world get you down. If no one stands by you, my dear, there is always God.

## LEXICON

*begângî*: foreignness; hostility; from *begâna*: alien; foreign.

*kalq*: the created beings; the world; mankind.

*be-dil*: disheartened; lit., without heart.

First line: 'O Ghalib, don't be disheartened by the hostility of mankind...'

*ko 'î nahîñ terâ*: there is none belonging to you; there is none to side with you.

*to*: then; in that case.

*merî jân*: my dear; lit., my life force.

*kudâ*: God.

Second line: 'If there is none here to call your own, there is at least God.'

## EXPLICATION

As the last verse of the ghazal, it contains the poet's pen name. This convention allows the poet to disassociate himself from the persona of the poet-lover and to make wide-ranging ironic comments. The irony here is that God is as much the Creator of the *kalq* as of Ghalib. An utterance that at first appears to express trust in God turns into a statement full of doubt.

## THE COUPLET ITSELF

*begângî-i-kalq se be-dil na ho Gâlib*

*ko 'î nahîñ terâ to merî jân kudâ hai*

Ghalib seeks not merely a vivid or uncommon image to create poetry, but also a clustering of associations among as many elements in each couplet as possible. His ghazal as a whole remains a collection of heterogeneous ideas yoked together by the meter and rhyme pattern, but within each individual couplet he exerts tremendous effort to create a terse, compact poetic statement, closely linked in all its parts, and at once cerebral and sensuous.

## ‘Pseudo-dramatic’ Poems of Iqbal\*

Iqbal has rarely received the notice he deserves as a poet-craftsman of great skill and sensitivity. Many writers have reviewed Iqbal’s ideas on Poetry and Aesthetics but very few have made note of the aesthetics and poetics of Iqbal’s own verse. One notable exception is Professor Muhammad Sadiq, who devoted an entire section to that subject in his history of Urdu literature.<sup>1</sup> Another, much earlier and rather disreputable, though historically quite interesting, case is that of the anonymous reviewer in the *Avadh Panç* who wrote a lengthy series of articles soon after Iqbal’s second Urdu volume, *Bâl-i-Jibrîl* (Gabriel’s Wing), came out in 1935.<sup>2</sup> He castigated Iqbal for mistakes of idiom and for transgressing the traditional conventions of Urdu and Persian poetry. Needless to say, the Lucknow critic remains buried in well-deserved neglect, while *Bâl-i-Jibrîl* is universally regarded as Iqbal’s finest book of poetry in Urdu. The credit for it goes to Iqbal the poet-craftsman as much as to Iqbal the thinker.

Iqbal was an innovative poet, though he wrote neither free nor blank verse. He wrote ghazals, the conventional lyric, and *nazms*, i.e. poems in various stanzaic forms but with regular meters and rhymes. Here we are not concerned with Iqbal’s

\* Revised. Originally appeared in *Journal of South Asian and Middle Eastern Studies*, no. 2, December 1977, pp. 58–67.

<sup>1</sup> Muhammad Sadiq, *A History of Urdu Literature* (Oxford, 1964), p. 372 ff.

<sup>2</sup> ‘Idbar’ (Pseudonym), ‘*Miqrâz-i-Idbârîl dar Bâl-i-Jibrîl*’ (The Scissors of Adversity at the Wings of Gabriel), in *Avadh Panç* (Lucknow), May 12, 1935, and several subsequent issues. The contentious nature of the comments may be gauged from the fact that the reviewer insistently called Iqbal’s ghazal *nazm*.

ghazal, where his innovations are significant, particularly in the way he expanded the range of associations of various traditional symbols and beat out the path which was then followed by the ghazal writers in the Progressive literary movement. This brief article deals only with one of Iqbal's favourite modes of poetic expression in his *nazms* (henceforth referred to simply as 'poems'). Iqbal's poems are metrically conventional, yet they possess an effect of variety and freshness which is not merely of the surface. He creates this variegated quality by using different, often unusual, stanza forms, by displaying a remarkable ear for the music that choices of meters and words can create, and by creating a heightened sense of drama through dialogue. It is only to this last aspect that this paper seeks to draw attention.

Some of Iqbal's most important poems, in Persian as well as Urdu, are exquisite examples of what may be called 'pseudo-dramatic' poetry—they are poems with certain elements of drama in them and their success is essentially due to the way they are structured. In dramatic poetry, according to one writer, poets 'speak through interior monologues or assumed masks; they liberate minor objects and elevate them as striking symbols; they indulge in contrasts between great and small, or private and public, or ancient and contemporary, or elegant and tawdry—in short, they strive for a heightening, not by connected discourse, but by ellipses.'<sup>3</sup> Iqbal did not write interior monologues, but he did create a 'dramatic' effect in many important poems through other ways.

Iqbal is primarily didactic in intentions; in his poems he is aware of an audience and consciously addresses it. Toward that end he insists on using what Eliot calls the second voice of poetry. Didactic poetry can be rather tiresome for most people except the true believer. Iqbal, however, enchants his readers and keeps their interest alive by assuming masks and by turning simple objects into potent symbols. By doing so he

<sup>3</sup> John J. Enck, 'Dramatic Poetry,' in *Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics*, ed. Alex Preminger, et al. (Princeton, 1974), p. 199.

relieves the monotony of the didactic second voice, giving it a semblance of the third voice of authentic drama. He discards continuous discourse, and instead presents to his reader pseudo-dramatic situations of contrast and confrontation. In calling them 'pseudo-dramatic' my intentions are not at all pejorative.<sup>4</sup> I certainly do not suggest any attempt at deception. What I wish to convey is the fact that they are devoid of any bare narrative—as is proper for true drama—and yet they lack genuine action. The characters or personae do not take on the kind of three-dimensional individuality that can come through action alone. Iqbal's 'pseudo-dramatic' poems, however, are not mere lifeless tableaux, for something does take place in them, invariably through a verbal exchange. One can, therefore, also call them 'poems of dialogue.'

A closer look brings out finer distinctions. In some the dialogue forms a disputation, in others a chain of inquiry. There are other variations too. In some of these poems, the poet may himself be one of the protagonists—sometimes with a mask on—in others, a mere observer or recorder of the event. But the core structure is always that of a dialogue, and, in that sense, reflects perhaps Iqbal's training as a jurist and a philosopher.<sup>5</sup>

Below, some such poems will be discussed under three headings: (1) Poems of Disputation, (2) Poems of Inquiry, and (3) Poems of Witnessing. As will become evident, further sub-categories can also be made, but have not been made here. Nor does the discussion include all the poems that show 'pseudo-dramatic' characteristics.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>4</sup> Perhaps the word closest to my view is 'ersatz.'

<sup>5</sup> We know that earlier in his life Iqbal had been quite fond of music and perhaps even dance, but there seems to be no record of any fondness for theatre, whether in India or during his stays in Europe.

<sup>6</sup> A partial listing of such poems would include: '*Aql-o-Dil*, '*Isq aur Maut*, *Šikva*, *Javâb-i-Šikva*, *Aktar-i-Subh*, *Kizr-i-Râh*,' and '*Ek Mukâlama*,' in *Bâng-i-Dirâ* (1924); *Lenin Kudâ ke Huzûr Men*, *Farišton kâ Gît*, *Farmân-i-Kudâ*, *Pîr-o-Murîd*, *Jibrîl-o-Iblîs*, and '*Azân*' in *Bâl-i-Jibrîl* (1935);

In certain poems the dialogue is in the spirit of a disputation between two protagonists—in some cases, each trying to assert one's supremacy over the other. The poet simply presents the individual arguments, ostensibly leaving the verdict to the reader. As is well known, this is a fairly respectable, old genre of poetry in both Persian and Arabic, its origin lying in Middle Eastern antiquity.<sup>7</sup> In Arabic such poems are called *munâzara* or *muhâvara* and it is the latter term that Iqbal infrequently uses in the titles of such poems. An excellent example would be his Persian poem, '*Muhâvara Mâbain Kudâ va Insân*' (A Dispute between God and Man).<sup>8</sup> But first let us glance at a simple, early poem titled '*Aql-o-Dil*' (Intellect and Heart).<sup>9</sup>

One day Intellect said to Heart,  
I guide those who are lost.  
From the earth I range to the heavens,  
Just see, how far I can reach.  
I give meaning to the Book of Life;  
I make visible God's great glory.

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*Taqdîr (Iblîs-o-Yazdân),* and '*Subh-i-Qaman*' in *Zarb-i-Kalîm* (1936); *Iblîs kî Majlis-i-Şurâ, Tasvîr-va-Musavvir,* and '*Âlam-i-Barzak*' in *Armugân-i-Hijâz* (1938); *Taskîr-i-Fitrat, Muhâvara-i-'Ilm-o-'Isq, Muhâvara Mâbain Kudâ va Insân,* and '*Hûr-va-Şâ'ir*' in *Payâm-i-Masriq*; and the entire book, *Jâvid Nâma* (1932).

<sup>7</sup> Jes P. Asmussen, *Studies in Judeo-Persian Literature* (Leiden: 1973), Chapter II ('A Judeo-Persian Precedence-Dispute Poem and Some Thoughts on the History of the Genre.'), pp. 32–59.

Through Arabic this genre also spread into various European languages. Cf. *Streifdichtung* in German. Some of the earliest poems by Iqbal are Urdu adaptations of several English poems for children that belong to this genre. For example, '*Ek Makrâ aur Makkhî*' (The Spider and the Fly); '*Ek Pahâr aur Gilehrî*' (The Mountain and the Squirrel); and '*Ek Gâ'e aur Bakrî*' (The Cow and the Goat) in *Bâng-i-Dirâ*, all written before 1905.

<sup>8</sup> Included in *Payâm-i-Masriq*. See Iqbal, *Kulliyât-i-Iqbâl, Fârsî* (Lahore, 1973), p. 284.

<sup>9</sup> Included in *Bâng-i-Dirâ*; written before 1905. Iqbal, *Kulliyât-i-Iqbâl, Urdû* (Lahore, 1973), p. 41.

You—a mere clot of blood;  
 I put to shame the finest ruby.  
 Heart said, That might be true, but  
 You should see what I am.  
 You merely know Life's secret,  
 But I see it with my eyes.  
 You beget learning, I gnosis.  
 You search for God; I make Him seen.  
 See, how high my status is,  
 In me resides the Almighty.<sup>10</sup>

The final word is with Heart, so we know who the winner is in that dispute, but in the dispute between God and Man, as delineated by Iqbal, we see an interesting stalemate: God is all powerful, but Man, too, plays a critical role in the scheme of things.

#### God

I made this world, from one same earth and water,  
 You made Tartaria, Nubia, and Iran;  
 I forged from dust the iron's unsullied ore,  
 You fashioned sword and arrowhead and gun;  
 You shaped the axe to hew the garden tree,  
 You wove the cage to hold the singing-bird.

#### Man

You made the night and I the lamp,  
 And You the clay and I the cup;  
 You—desert, mountain-peak, and vale:  
 I—flower-bed, park, and orchard; I  
 Who grind a mirror out of stone,  
 Who brew from poison honey-drink.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>10</sup> My translation. For a complete translation, see *Poems from Iqbal*, trans. Victor G. Kiernan (Bombay, 1947), p. 24. The later edition of the book, strangely, does not contain it.

<sup>11</sup> *Poems from Iqbal*, trans. Victor G. Kiernan (London, 1955), p. 93.

A different kind of disputation is found in the two long 'Complaint' poems written in Urdu, '*Šikva*' and '*Javâb-i-Šikva*,' 'Complaint' and 'Answer to the Complaint.'<sup>12</sup> To the best of our knowledge, Iqbal did not originally plan the second poem at the same time as the first, but the immense popularity of '*Šikva*' and the logic of Iqbal's own thought both demanded a sequel, and the two poems now form an inseparable pair. Together they are perhaps the two most popularly known poems of Iqbal. In the first, the poet complains to God on behalf of all Muslims concerning their humiliating state in the affairs of the world. He enumerates the past deeds of the Muslims to underscore his complaint of God's apparent 'neglect.'

We erased the smudge of falsehood from the parchment firmament,  
We redeemed the human species from the chain of slavery;  
And we filled the Holy Kaaba with our foreheads humbly bent,  
Clutching to our fervent bosoms the Koran in ecstasy.  
Yet the charge is laid against us we have played the faithless part;  
If disloyal we have proved, hast Thou deserved to win our heart?<sup>13</sup>

He then continues:

Why no more are worldly riches among Muslims to be found,  
Since Thy power is as of old beyond compute and unconfined?<sup>14</sup>

There is much more in a similar vein, expressing the sentiments of an average Muslim, often in a delightfully playful

<sup>12</sup> Included in *Bāng-i-Dirā; Kulliyât-i-Iqbāl, Urdū*, pp. 163–170 and pp. 199–208, respectively. Two English translations are available: *Complaint and Answer*, trans. A. J. Arberry (Lahore, 1955), and *Complaint and Answer: Iqbal's Dialogue with Allah*, trans. Khushwant Singh (Delhi, 1981). The two poems, according to Muhammad Sadiq, were written in 1909 and 1912, respectively.

<sup>13</sup> Arberry, *Complaint*, p. 15.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 19



mode. However, a more serious note comes in near the end, and the complaint ends in a supplication.

Grant at last Thy sore-tried people in their difficulties ease.  
Make the ant of little substance peer of Solomon to be; . . .<sup>15</sup>

In the second poem, God responds to the complaint by pointing out the listless state of the Muslims themselves.

We would fain be bountiful, but no petitioner is there;  
When no traveller approaches, how can We guide on the way? . . .<sup>16</sup>

God charges the Muslims with a lack of initiative. They are also guilty of being disunited, having fallen a victim to rising Nationalism, and they have lost the true spirit of Islam that was a combination of Faith and Action.

Nations come to birth by Faith; let Faith expire, and nations die;  
So, when gravitation ceases, the thronged stars asunder fly.<sup>17</sup>  
.....

Sure enough, you have your Syeds, Mirzas, Afghans, all the rest;  
But can you claim you are Muslims, if the truth must be  
confessed?<sup>18</sup>

The poem ends with a promise from God:

Be thou faithful to Muhammad, and We yield Ourselves to thee;  
Not this world alone—the Tablet and the Pen thy prize shall be.<sup>19</sup>

<sup>15</sup> Ibid. p. 29.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid. p. 42.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid. p. 45.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid. p. 53.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid. p. 72.

In what may be called the poems of inquiry the dialogue consists of questions asked by the poet, speaking in the first person, addressed to some figure, historical or imaginary, and answers given by that figure. These answers essentially represent the opinions of the poet himself concerning various issues; he quotes the other protagonist, or puts words in his mouth, to express his own conclusions. In a poem like '*Pîr-o-Murîd*' (The Master and the Disciple), the poet Rumi's responses to Iqbal's questions are Rumi's own verses carefully chosen by Iqbal as the most apt responses.<sup>20</sup>

#### The Indian Disciple

Your glance makes my heart expand,  
now explain the secret in the command: *Jihad*.

#### The Mentor, Rumi

Shatter God's creation too at God's command;  
Cast the Friend's stone at the Friend's crystal.<sup>21</sup>

While in some other such poems of enquiry Iqbal provides the words to his addressee—for example in '*Kizr-i-Râh*' (The Khizr [Guide] of the Road), where Iqbal asks the legendary figure, Khizr, to explain to him several raging issues of the modern world.<sup>22</sup>

#### Poet to Khizr

To thy world-ranging eye is visible the storm  
Whose breakers now sleep silently beneath the sea;  
That poor man's boat, that wall of the orphan, that pure spirit!  
The wisdom even of Moses stood in awe of thee;

<sup>20</sup> Included in *Bâl-i-Jibrîl; Kulliyât-i-Iqbâl*, Urdû, pp. 426–434.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid. p. 427.

<sup>22</sup> Included in *Bâng-i-Dirâ*; ibid. p. 255–266. According to Sadiq, it was written in 1921.

Thou shunnest all abodes, to tread the wilderness,  
 Of day and night, of yesterdays and tomorrows, free.  
 What is the riddle of life? what thing is kingship? why  
 Must labourer and merchant bloodily disagree?<sup>23</sup>

Khizr to Poet

The chapter of the Kings, let me  
 Unriddle to your mind.  
 A conjurer's wand is sovereignty,  
 That conquering nations find.  
 If ever a little in their sleep  
 His subjects stir, the sure  
 Enchantments of the ruler steep  
 Their wits in night once more. . . .

In the West the people rule, they say:  
 And what is this new reign?  
 The same old harp, the same strings play  
 The Empires' old refrain.<sup>24</sup>

A third set of poems may, for the sake of convenience, be referred to as poems of 'witnessing.' These poems consist of a dialogue or a series of dialogues between two or more protagonists, not involving, however, the ego of the poet, and the dialogue is not necessarily always in the nature of a disputation. In fact, in these poems, the poet observes or 'witnesses' an imagined scene, which he then shares with his readers. The scenes contain hardly any action; they consist only of verbal exchanges. Even these exchanges may sometime appear to be a great deal independent of each other. In other words, rather than becoming a sustained dramatic scene, what the poet imagines turns out to be a series of tableaux, somewhat static in themselves, yet capable of generating drama in their juxtaposition. Some of the important poems belonging to this

<sup>23</sup> Kiernan, Bombay edition, pp. 43-4.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid. pp. 45-6.

category would be the trilogy concerning Lenin and God,<sup>25</sup> or the cycle entitled '*Taskîr-i-Fitrat*' (The Conquest of Nature).<sup>26</sup> A shorter example would be '*Taqdîr*' (Fate).<sup>27</sup>

Satan (to God)

O God, Creator! I did not hate your Adam,  
That captive of Far-and-Near and Swift-and-Slow;  
And what presumption could refuse to *You*  
Obedience? If I would not kneel to him,  
The cause was Your own fore-ordaining will.

God (to Satan)

When did that mystery dawn on you? before,  
Or after your sedition?

Satan (to God)

After, oh brightness  
Whence all the glory of all being flows.

God (to His angels)

See what a grovelling nature taught him this  
Fine theorem! His not kneeling, he pretends,  
Belonged to My fore-ordinance; gives his freedom  
Necessity's base title;—wretch! his own  
Consuming fire he calls a wreath of smoke.<sup>28</sup>

<sup>25</sup> Included in *Bâl-i-Jibrîl; Kulliyât-i-Iqbâl, Urdû*, pp. 398–402. Kiernan translates only the first and the third poem (London edition, pp. 42–44).

<sup>26</sup> Included in *Payâm-i-Masriq; Kulliyât-i-Iqbâl, Fârsî*, pp. 155–58.

<sup>27</sup> Included in *Zarb-i-Kalîm; Kulliyât-i-Iqbâl, Urdû*, pp. 508–9. Iqbal identifies the poem as an adaptation of something by the Andalusian mystic, Ibn 'Arabi. The occasion imagined and expanded is mentioned in the Qur'an (II:34). After creating Adam, God asked the angels to bow before him. All did, except one: Iblis or Satan.

<sup>28</sup> Kiernan, London edition, p. 64.

One of the last books that Iqbal published in Persian was *Jâvîd Nâma* (The Book of Eternity). All critics agree that as a brilliant achievement of poetic art it is Iqbal's finest work: a dazzling panorama of shifting scenes, unusual juxtapositions, and fascinating exchanges. Its language is simple yet elegant; its rhythms and rhymes musically vibrant as well as contextually perfect. No English translation has succeeded in doing justice to it, and the task is well nigh impossible.<sup>29</sup> While reading it one wishes some brilliant composer would set it to music, like an oratorio or a concert opera. It is a 'dialogue' poem, but on a scale never before attempted by Iqbal. Its numerous protagonists—some historical, some imaginary—representing an amazing range of speculations and ideas, speak in their own as well as in Iqbal's words, to each other as well as to Zindarud, the persona adopted by Iqbal on an imagined celestial journey in the company of his ideal mentor, Rumi.

Iqbal did not write a play, and it is not known if he ever even planned to write one. Near the end of his life he wanted to write two long poems, one in Urdu, on the story of the Ramayana, and the other in English—he had even chosen a title, 'The Book of an Unknown Prophet'—modelled on Nietzsche's *Also Sprach Zarathustra*. No record indicates that any progress was made on either project. Regrettably, Iqbal had a very low opinion of both the stage and the screen. One cannot blame that on the quality of the theatre and cinema in India at that time, for Iqbal had had ample, though apparently little availed, opportunity to experience the art of the stage while in Europe. His short poem entitled 'Cinema' reads like a diatribe, with him refusing to see in that art any possibility of aesthetic or intellectual reward.<sup>30</sup> Cinema, for him, is nothing but a new kind of 'fetish-fashioning, idol-making and [idol]-

<sup>29</sup> The most readable English translation is A. J. Arberry's *Javid Namah* (London, 1966).

<sup>30</sup> Included in *Bâl-i-Jibrîl; Kulliyât-i-Iqbâl, Urdû*, p. 450. English translation in Kiernan, London edition, pp. 57–58.

mongering.' His contempt for the theatre arises from the same impulse. Acting, for Iqbal, involves a denial and suppression of one's selfhood, and that is the worst crime Man can commit.

Your body be the abode of another's ego?  
God forbid! Do not revive idol-mongering.<sup>31</sup>

It would be relevant here to ask ourselves: why did Muslims all over the world fail to create viable theatre until quite recently? The Arabs translated Greek philosophy and sciences, but entirely ignored the great plays. Was it merely a matter of different literary tastes? Was it just because of the presence of some sort of sexual segregation in public spaces and activities in the medieval Islamic society? Was it due to the despotic nature of the milieu which, as Reza Baraheni suggests, was not conducive to a true dialogue?<sup>32</sup> Was acting ever actually regarded as a heretical act? These are important questions which I am, however, not qualified to answer. The fact remains that Iqbal, despite a fondness for creating occasions for drama in his poems, never felt the urge to write a true drama, and instead remained quite satisfied with the 'pseudo-dramatic.' But that in itself was a lasting, even unique, contribution to Urdu poetry, for which we must be grateful to him.

<sup>31</sup> 'Tiyâtr' (Theatre), included in *Zarb-i-Kalâm; Kulliyât-i-Iqbâl*, *Urdû*, p. 568.

<sup>32</sup> *The Crowned Cannibals* (New York, 1977), p. 70.

## Poet-audience Interaction at Urdu Musha'irahs\*

The Urdu word *muṣā'ira* (Mushai'rah) is a modified form of the Arabic *muṣā'ara*, a verbal noun, which is reciprocal in reference, and whose primary meaning, according to Steingass, is 'contending with, or excelling in poetry.'<sup>1</sup> That still is the basic meaning of the word in Iran. *Muṣā'ara*, in Persian, refers to a poetic contest in which two persons or groups exchange couplets back and forth, each required, mostly, to respond with a couplet beginning with the letter with which the opponent's couplet ends.<sup>2</sup> In the Urdu milieu of South Asia a contest of this kind is called *baitbâzî* (the game of couplets), while *musha'irah* exclusively refers to a gathering of poets, where they read or recite their verses before an audience.<sup>3</sup> Elements of game and contest, however, are still discernible at *musha'irahs*, and now perhaps play the most important role in making them popular.

\* Revised. Originally published in *Urdu and Muslim South Asia: Studies in Honour of Ralph Russell* ed. Christopher Shackle (London, 1989), pp. 167–173.

<sup>1</sup> F. Steingass, *A Comprehensive Persian-English Dictionary* (London, 1892).

<sup>2</sup> See Muhammad Saburi Tabrizi, *Muṣā'ara* (Tehran, 1341 Shamsi); and Mahdi Suhaili, *Muṣā'ara* (Tehran, 1343 Shamsi).

<sup>3</sup> The conventional way to begin a *baitbâzî* was for one side to recite the Persian verse (Sa'di's?), *hast kalid-i-dar-i-ganj-hakim // bismillâh-al-Rahmân-al-Rahîm*; the other side then responded with a verse beginning with the letter *mîm*, and the game was on. Hindi *antākṣarî* was perhaps a recent invention, in imitation of the popular Urdu game. That it is now a TV. game and employs only film songs is a sign of our cultural progress.

According to Shibli Nu'mani, *musha'irahs* in the latter sense—i.e. assemblies of poets—began in the Indo-Persian milieu at the beginning of the sixteenth century as assemblies of poets at the homes of their patron nobles.<sup>4</sup> Muhammad Taqi Mir tells us that in his days, in the Delhi of the middle of the eighteenth century, a new term was devised on the pattern of *muṣā'ara* to describe the gatherings of *rekta* or Urdu poets.<sup>5</sup> Apparently, the new term did not gain wide currency and was soon replaced by the original word.

No detailed descriptions of early Urdu *musha'irahs* of either Deccan or Delhi have come down to us; the only available information is fragmentary and is for Delhi, beginning with the second half of the eighteenth century in the form of incidental comments in various *tazkiras* (biographical accounts) dealing with Urdu poets.<sup>6</sup> We learn that in the walled city, or just outside it, *musha'irahs* were held quite frequently, often at regular intervals, and that nights were preferred, particularly, it appears, moonlit nights. They were held at the homes of individuals as well as such public places as those of the *dargāh* and *takiya* associated with Sufi saints. Infrequently they were held in the Red Fort too. In every instance, however, the audience seems to have been relatively restricted: there is no evidence to suggest that they were as public an event in the beginning as they came to be in the twentieth century. Limitations of space and the protocols of an hierarchical society, no doubt, dictated that this be so. Also, it appears that few

<sup>4</sup> Shibli Nu'mani, *Si'r-al-'Ajam* (Azamgarh, 1945), vol. III, p. 17. Nu'mani does not indicate the source of his information.

<sup>5</sup> Muhammad Taqi Mir, *Nikāt-al-Ṣu'arā*, ed. Abdul Haq (Aurangabad, 1935), p. 147.

<sup>6</sup> We now have a comprehensive book on the subject: Ali Javad Zaidi, *Târîk-i-Musâ'ira* (Bombay, 1992). For an excellent summary account, see Munibur Rahman, 'The Musha'irah,' in *Annual of Urdu Studies*, no. 3 (1983), pp. 75–84. A charming mixture of fiction and history, and a valuable source, is Farhatullah Beg's *Dihlî-kî Ākiri Sam'* (The Last Candle of Delhi), available also in an English translation: Akhtar Qamber, *The Last Musha'irah of Dehli* (New Delhi, 1979).



non-participants—i.e. non-poets—attended those early assemblies. In other words, there was at that time no distinguishable audience quite separate from the participating poets. The host of the evening was also the presiding person; he conducted the proceedings and usually started the musha'irah by presenting his own verses first.<sup>7</sup> Then the other poets were invited to read, beginning with the young and the lesser known. The people attending sat forming an arena, i.e. with a space in the middle. A candle circulated in the assembly; it being placed by an attendant before each poet as his turn came. The poets read strictly in order of fame and seniority, with the master poets, the *ustāds*, coming at the very end. Any lapse in that regard could lead to serious trouble for the host. Interestingly, the humorous [*hazl*] or more idiosyncratic poets, including the rekhti poets, read at the very beginning—quite the opposite of the case now. So far as we know those early musha'irahs were exclusively male affairs.

Returning to the element of competition mentioned earlier, its origin no doubt lay in the tribal role of the poet among the Arabs: poets praised their own tribes and disparaged tribal enemies, not only in the assemblies of their own respective tribes but also on public occasions such as annual fairs at sacred sites or battlefields. In the milieu of royal courts in the Islamicate lands, poets praised kings and nobles, and competed with each other for royal favours and titles, gifts of jobs and patronage from the nobles, and fame and prestige in the society at large. In India, for the Urdu poets, the arenas for playing out this rivalry were the musha'irahs, just as much as were the more select and private assemblies [*mahfils*] at the homes of the nobles.

<sup>7</sup> Two reasons probably governed this practice. (1) It somewhat mitigated the tensions caused by issues of reverse precedence [*taqdīm va tākīr*], i.e. whose turn to read came later rather than earlier—the higher your rank as a poet the later came your turn. And (2) it also followed the prevalent protocol—so different from what is done now—that the host didn't ask a guest to perform for his pleasure; he rather performed himself for the guest's pleasure.

In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the chief source of competition in an Urdu musha'irah lay in the convention of *tarh* (lit. manner or scheme of things). A hemistich [*misra'*] was announced well in advance—it was called the *misra'-i-tarh* (the foundation line)—indicating the metre and the rhyme scheme [*qâfiya* and *radîf*] that all participating poets then had to follow in composing ghazals for that musha'irah. Poets sought to outdo each other in discovering unusual rhymes and in finding original and more subtly nuanced uses for the rhymes that were more familiar, always trying to write as many acceptable couplets as they could.<sup>8</sup> A master poet [*ustâd*] would not only compose a ghazal of his own but also often write verses to distribute among his disciples [*şâgirds*].<sup>9</sup> He would also correct and improve their original verses, for any error on their part would reflect badly on him. In earlier musha'irahs it was fairly common for poets to question each other's craftsmanship and linguistic or rhetorical prowess. Such arguments could develop into lengthy feuds if they were taken up by rival groups of disciples or instigated by some patron for his own amusement.<sup>10</sup> The use of a *tarh* in musha'irahs gradually began to lose favour with poets and audience alike, and became a rare exception in the twentieth

<sup>8</sup> It is interesting to note that when in 1870 in Lahore a British administrator organized a different kind of musha'irah—poets were asked to compose poems on a set theme rather than a *tarh*—the element of competition was maintained and prizes were offered.

<sup>9</sup> It is of utmost important to remember that in pre-modern society, poetry was considered a science [*'ilm*] as well as a craft or vocation [*fann*], and one needed to apprentice oneself to some master poet in order to learn how to write good poetry. Every master had his devoted disciples, whose numbers and names were matters of prestige for him. One suspects that the extreme emphasis placed on this apprenticeship and the close identity between an *ustâd* and his *şâgird* were developments that took place in India, particularly in eighteenth century Delhi. It is a subject that deserves to be explored.

<sup>10</sup> Muhammad Yaqub Amir has two very useful books on the subject: *Urdû ke Ibtidâ'î Adabî Ma'rike: Ibtidâ Se 'Ahd-i-Mirzâ va Mir Tak* (New Delhi, 1992), and *Urdû Ke Adabî Ma'rike: Inşâ Se Gâlib Tak* (New Delhi, 1982).

century when the nature and size of audiences radically changed.

Musha'irahs are now public affairs of a substantial size. (Small private poetic gatherings are now called by some other name, e.g. *nisist* or *mahfil*.) Present day musha'irahs may be held indoors in an auditorium or a hall, or outdoors in some open space or under a large tent. The easy availability of sound amplification systems has made it possible for thousands of people to attend any musha'irah. Almost without exception, musha'irahs are now held only at night, beginning around nine or ten and ending in the early hours of morning, even later. One may say that any musha'irah lasting less than four hours is not truly worthy of the name.

More significantly, what were originally participatory events, in which performers and audience were almost one and the same, have exclusively become occasions for a small number of poets to perform before a numerically much larger and attributively more diverse group of people. This change is physically visible in the way poets are now seated on a raised stage, plainly separate from the vast majority of their audience. There is still a presiding person, a *sadr*, but now usually he is some politician or bureaucrat who will most likely not be a poet himself, and will play hardly any role in the proceedings.

A crucial role, equal to and often more than the poets', is now played by an entirely new member of the cast—the conductor or *nâzim* of the musha'irah who is more often referred to as the 'announcer.' His is not an easy job. The announcer is expected to do much more than simply to announce the names of the poets in some preferred or set order. He, no doubt, still has to be sensitive to the feelings of the poets and must arrange their names in an order of reverse precedence that will not hurt their egos. At the same time, he has to be alert and responsive to the changing moods of the audience, and must not let it get too restive. This requires that he should come up—in the manner of a disk jockey—with a good mix of the popular and not-so-popular poets, and further, find

novel or catchy ways to introduce them. He must also be quite witty, and ready with jokes and literary anecdotes to smooth over any rough moments. And he must of course have a head for poetry, for one apt couplet serves his purpose better than ten elegant phrases. On some occasions he may find himself acting much like a referee at some contest, mediating between feuding poets as often as between a hostile audience and a not so popular poet. The bigger a musha'irah, the more crucial the role of the announcer becomes. His decisions and ad lib comments can play almost the decisive role in the success or failure of a big musha'irah. The announcer can add to a poet's reputation by giving him an extra laudatory introduction or by inviting him to read at some critical moment during the evening. On the other hand, he can also ruin a poet's act by introducing him in a cursory fashion, by not paying him much attention during his performance, or by calling him to the microphone immediately after some immensely popular poet. And these are only the more obvious ways an announcer makes his presence felt. A good announcer, therefore, is courted by most poets: this means more business for the announcer, which then makes more poets seek his good will, for the remuneration they get very much depends on how popular they seem to be. It was earlier the rule for the announcer to be a poet himself, but now some people, at least in India, have gained fame exclusively as announcers, and seem to have made a profession of it.

The original musha'irahs were occasions where Urdu poets sought recognition from their peers. A poet's reputation was built upon the opinion of other poets, the number of his disciples and their status in that stratified society, his ability to compose properly and to defend his compositions from any adverse criticism, his talent for composing at command if necessary, and so forth. In all cases, he was judged either by his peers, i.e. other poets, or by his patrons, who were more often poets themselves. Every poet strove to show not only how good a poet he was but also in what ways he was superior to other poets. That twofold aim still exists, but now a poet

must seek approval from an audience that is anything but an assembly of his peers. Today's audiences at musha'irahs are separated from the poets not only physically, but also in many other ways. A musha'irah audience these days will include a large number of people who may not be able to read Urdu, or who in significant numbers may not use Urdu as their mother-tongue. It will include people from all strata of society, representing all ranges of literacy, education, and value orientation. They will share a fondness for Urdu poetry, but their notions of what constitutes good poetry will be quite disparate. In fact, we now have poets who are called 'musha'irah poets' [*muṣā'ire-ke ṣā'ir*] because they are able to win over any musha'irah audience regardless of the constitution of their audience or the literary quality of their verses.

What makes one a good 'musha'irah poet'? The primary requirement, it appears, is a good style of delivery. At present, in order to be a success at any musha'irah, every poet, except for someone with a very high literary reputation or some other star quality, must have a distinctive way of presenting his poetry. That, in the great majority of cases, means a good voice and a musically attractive manner of recitation. This particular style of chanting or recitation, called *tarannum*, has been carefully analysed by the ethnomusicologist Regula Qureshi,<sup>11</sup> and nothing more needs to be added. We should, however, note that, except for those who exclusively write either humorous or political poetry, popular 'musha'irah poets' rarely use the simple, declamatory style called *taht-al-lafz*; they tend to favour *tarannum*, often pushing its musical quality to the limits where it may begin to resemble singing. On the whole, however, most poets maintain the distinction between *tarannum* and singing, and try to invent new mannerisms or flourishes within the limits of *tarannum*. A 'musha'irah poet' with a pleasing *tarannum* does not have to worry much about the quality of his poetry, or even his inven-

<sup>11</sup> Regula Qureshi, 'Tarannum, the Chanting of Urdu Poetry,' in *Ethnomusicology*, vol. 13, no. 3 (1967), pp. 425-468.

tory. His reputation will remain safe, even if he sticks to a handful of his more popular compositions. A typical musha'irah audience would rather listen to some, familiar old poem recited in its favourite *tarannum* than ask for freshness of thought and newness of imagery.

*Tarannum* or no, all poets present their ghazals in a certain manner which is significant. The ghazal is still by far the most favoured genre of poetry in Urdu, and in the context of musha'irahs one can safely assert that eighty to ninety per cent of the poetry recited will be in this form. As is well known, the basic unit of poetry in a ghazal is a couplet [*bait* or *ḡi'r*]: two lines which are grammatically and, more often than not, also thematically independent of the other couplets in that ghazal. As the readers read or the listeners listen to a ghazal, they focus their attention on one couplet at a time. This fragmentary quality facilitates the following manner of presentation which is scrupulously adhered to by all ghazal poets at a musha'irah. The poet reads the first line [*misra*] of a couplet, then briefly pauses. A few poets sitting nearby, the announcer, or some members of the wider audience can then be expected to repeat that line. The poet himself then repeats the first line, and continues with the second line. That completes the presentation of one couplet. The audience, if it liked the verse, would then show its appreciation and delight by shouting certain expressions or phrases—'*vâh-vâh* (Bravo!); *subhân-allâh* (God be Praised!); *bahot kûb* (Very fine.). If the couplet pleased some people a great deal they might ask for an encore by shouting, '*Mukarrar irṣâd*,' or '*Phir parhiye*,' (Please recite again.). And the poet would oblige them by repeating the couplet as many times as they ask. He would also show his appreciation of their praise by bowing his head, raising his right hand to his forehead in salutation, or making some other such gesture.

This particular order of repetition and response probably originated in the desire to facilitate the audition and comprehension of a couplet by the people separated from the poet by

some distance. It, however, also serves to enhance the enjoyment of the couplet in a crucial way: the pause, followed by the repetition of the first line, creates an air of suspense and expectation which draws the audience closer to the performance. As the audience hears the first line, it obviously learns one half of the couplet's contents. Add to this the fact that after the first couplet, if not after the very first line of a ghazal, the audience knows the metre and rhyme scheme the poet intends to follow. The more cognizant in the audience will also be familiar with the conventions of the ghazal. Consequently, while the poet pauses then repeats the first line, the audience may race ahead and work out the second line, either fully, partially, or merely to the extent of its rhyme. In fact, one may sometimes hear the second line called out by the audience before the poet recites it. This sequence of events is in a sense the reverse of the poet's original creative process: a ghazal poet most often begins with the rhyme-word [*qāfiya*] and works backward to the first line. This creation of suspense, followed by its resolution, whether in the form of fulfilled expectations or some surprise, greatly adds to the pleasure that an audience seeks at a musha'irah.

Of course, in order to gather any applause, the couplet must have some thematic or linguistic virtue. An unexpected or obscure rhyme no longer suffices, and a trite poetic statement, no matter how melodiously chanted, may not be well received. The audience at a musha'irah never hesitates to express its contempt for mere poetasters. If it can be loud in praising a good poet, it can be equally emphatic in ridiculing a bad one. A poet may draw upon himself an audience's wrath for several reasons. His style of declaiming or chanting may be too plain or, alternatively, too obtrusive; his verse may have absolutely nothing to recommend it; or his physical appearance—or just his clothes—may be too deliberately striking. It is fairly common in musha'irahs for a number of poets to be hooted away from the microphone. This can sometimes happen even to the more established poets. Younger audiences, predictably, tend to be more boisterous, and musha'irahs at educational

institutions can be expected to turn into excruciating trials for the participating poets. On such occasions, some poets resort to presenting overly erotic, political or religious verses—particularly the latter—in order to appeal to the predominantly Muslim audiences. Many a time this works, but one should give the younger audiences also credit for not always being taken in.

Every successful musha'irah poet must be sensitive to the mood of the audience, and able to respond to their silent or vocal cues. If he is a *nazm* writer—i.e. he writes thematically unified poems with linearly linked lines or couplets—he may try out a short and simple poem before launching into something long or complex. Another poet may read a few quatrains or perhaps some miscellaneous couplets, to get a sense of the audience's mood or preference, before committing himself to a particular ghazal. They all, of course, watch how the poets preceding them fare. In this regard, a ghazal writer has an additional advantage: his chosen genre allows him to change the order and number of his couplets at will. Usually, a ghazal writer will try to make his opening verse [*matla'*] quite good, to be followed by another of the better couplets. If he gets some applause he might try to sneak in a mediocre verse before presenting another good one. Thus a poet, while reading the same ghazal at different musha'irahs, may alter the order of the verses or vary their number to suit the audience.

As a poet reads, he is likely to draw the attention of his audience in many ways. He may say a few words to explain the couplet, particularly if there is some difficult allusion. Or he may simply say: 'please listen to this couplet'; or 'this couplet deserves special attention.' Often a poet may do this to quieten the other poets sitting nearby or simply to force a rival to acknowledge him, for, once directly addressed by a poet, other poets have to pay him attention and say something polite about his verse. The larger audience, of course, may not feel so constrained, but many in it may be impressed to some extent. The more informed people will even enjoy the subtle game of one-upmanship going on among the poets.



In a significant sense, a similar game goes on between the poet and the audience in contemporary musha'irahs. A large section of the audience appears to come with the attitude, 'Show me how good you are.' Most of them may not be too adept at recognizing genuine talent, but they can be trusted to be quick and ruthless if someone tries to fake greatness. They never fail to deflate pomposity. A good 'musha'irah poet' remembers that. He makes sure of appearing humble before the audience, no matter how arrogant he may be with his peers or how contemptuous he may appear of political and religious authority. A good 'musha'irah poet' never takes his audience for granted; at the same time, he uses every known device to manipulate it. One poet recently prefaced his reading by saying to the younger section of the audience, 'If *you* won't praise this next couplet, no one will.' Another poet, not too long ago, was heard referring to his recently dead wife at every reading for several months, thus earning his audience's immediate sympathy.

Urdu musha'irahs are not like the poetry-readings one sees in other languages in India, with the exception of Hindi, and in the West.<sup>12</sup> Urdu musha'irahs are larger in scale and much more lively. They are also quite complex in their dynamics. People come to a musha'irah not merely because they like poetry or admire certain poets; they come also to be active participants in the event. Further, they basically come to have a good time. They watch the poets contending with each other, and they themselves engage in a playful contest with them: they tacitly challenge the poets to win applause from them, or at least not draw their jeers. In that sense, contemporary musha'irahs are also vastly different from the original Urdu musha'irahs of the eighteenth century. Now the non-

<sup>12</sup> Historically, Hindi *kavi-sammelan* and *antākṣarī* have developed—not too successfully in the opinion of some, including mine—in imitation of Urdu *muṣā'ira* and *bait-bāzī*, respectively. Poetry readings in America are sad affairs, and the only audience participation is some polite applause at the end of a poem.

poet members of the audience have not only greatly increased in numbers but also in importance. They now contribute as much to the totality of a musha'irah as a performance or experience as do the poets. Whether these developments have been bad for Urdu poetry as a whole or good, is a subject beyond the limits of this short note. I can only say that even the new musha'irahs have immensely contributed to the popularity of Urdu; they have also made possible for many ordinary people to engage in some literary creativity and social interaction in the increasingly fragmenting and isolating society of urban India.

## Prize-Winning *Adab*: Five Urdu Books Written in Response to the Gazette Notification No. 791A (1868)\*

The officers of the British East India Company had started taking interest in the education of Indians even in the eighteenth century, but it was not until 1813 that a clear mandate in that regard was announced. That year, for the first time, a clause was inserted in the East India Company Act, declaring that 'it shall be lawful for the Governor-General in Council to direct that . . . a sum of not less than one lac of rupees [Rs. 100,000] in each year shall be set apart and applied to the revival and improvement of literature, and the encouragement of the learned natives of India, and for the introduction and promotion of a knowledge of the sciences among the inhabitants of the British territories in India.'<sup>1</sup> Although ten years went by before any action was taken, the next four decades saw the rapid development of an educational system that included both private and government institutions, catering to the traditional literary classes of both Hindus and Muslims. A major controversy developed, during this initial period, on the question of the medium of instruction. A group of so-called 'Orientalists' wanted to continue with the traditional medium

\* Revised. Originally appeared in *Moral Conduct and Authority: The Place of Adab in South Asian Islam*, ed. Barbara D. Metcalf (Berkeley, 1984), pp. 290–314.

<sup>1</sup> Quoted in Y. B. Mathur, *Women's Education in India, 1813–1966* (New York, 1973), p. 4.

of classical languages (Arabic, Persian, and Sanskrit), whereas another group of 'Anglicists' wished to use English. Eventually, the 'Orientalists' lost to the 'Anglicists' at the level of higher instruction. At the levels of primary and secondary education, they lost to regional vernaculars that, in turn, remained inferior in status to English.

In 1854, the Education Despatch from the Board of Control in London further directed the East India Company to expand its efforts, leading, among other things, to the establishment of regional departments of public instruction and the institution of universities in the Presidency towns of Calcutta, Madras, and Bombay. The despatch emphasized the 'importance of encouraging the study of the vernaculars as the only possible medium for mass education. . . . [It] further advocated the promotion of female education and Muslim education, the opening of schools and colleges for imparting technical instruction, and insisted on a policy of perfect religious neutrality.'<sup>2</sup> In North India, the effects of these policies were felt with the extension of the British authority over Delhi and the North-Western Provinces after 1803, over the Punjab after 1849, and over Oudh after 1856. The abortive revolt of 1857 did not significantly slow down the process; the policies of the Company were affirmed and continued by the Crown.

The decline of 'Oriental' learning, the increasing awareness on the part of literate people of the range of scientific knowledge available in English, and the need to provide school texts in regional vernaculars, led a number of individuals and associations to produce translations as well as original works in Urdu in the realm of what was seen as *'ilm* (knowledge; science), as opposed to *ḡi'r* and *dāstān* (poetry and tales). It is interesting to note that just when the teachers and students at the famous Delhi College (for the instruction of the natives) were engaged in translating into Urdu books on analytical geometry, optics, and galvanism, Goldsmith's *History of England*, selections from Plutarch's *Lives*, and Abercrombie's

<sup>2</sup> Ibid. p. 7.

*Mental Philosophy*,<sup>3</sup> the traditional *munṣif*s at the equally famous College of Fort William (for the instruction of British officers) were busy putting into simple Urdu the *Gulistan* of Sa'di, the *Tale of the Four Dervishes*, the *Tale of Amir Hamza*, *Singhasan Battisi*, the *Shakuntala* of Kalidasa, and a selection of stories from the *Arabian Nights*,<sup>4</sup> the books that the British thought were necessary to learn 'the language and the manners of the people of Hindostan.' The aim of the people at Delhi was to promote 'ilm in India through the medium of the vernaculars, whereas John Gilchrist of Fort William desired to 'form such a body of useful and entertaining literature in (Hindustani), as will ultimately raise it to that estimation among the natives, which it would many years ago have attained among an enlightened and energetic people.'<sup>5</sup> The work at Fort William dwelt upon the achievements of the past; the work at Delhi College was concerned with the needs of the present and the future.

The two aims were not necessarily in conflict—the syllabi of courses at Delhi reflected that fact—but as the motives behind education became increasingly utilitarian and the nature of education itself came to be defined by the British, a dichotomy between literature (now referred to as *adab*) and science (now referred to as 'ilm) began to be felt by many of the newly educated Muslims. It was at this time that the lieutenant-governor of the North-West Provinces, Sir William Muir, issued his momentous call for useful books in the vernacular. Its text follows.

Allahabad Government Gazette, Notification No. 791A, dated the 20th August 1868.

It is hereby announced that, with the view of encouraging authorship in the language of the North-Western Provinces, the Hon'ble Lieutenant-Governor is pleased to make it known that rewards will

<sup>3</sup> Abdul Haq, *Marhûm Dihlî Kâlij* (Delhi, 1945), pp. 141–43.

<sup>4</sup> M. Atique Siddiqi, *Origins of Modern Hindustani Literature* (Aligarh, 1963), pp. 159–60.

<sup>5</sup> Gilchrist to College Council, quoted in *ibid.* p. 127.

be given for the production of *useful works in the vernacular, of approved design and style, in any branch of science or literature.*

For this end, the writing may be original composition, or it may be a compilation, or it may be even a translation from books in any other language. Theological treatises will not be received, nor treatises containing anything obnoxious to morality. There is no other condition either as to the subject or treatment. The theme may belong to history, biography, or travel, science, art, or philosophy; it may be a work of fact or of fiction, and may be composed either in prose or verse. In short, the only condition is that the book shall subserve some useful purpose, either of instruction, entertainment, or mental discipline; that it shall be written in one or other of the current dialects, Oordoo or Hindee, and that there shall be excellence both in the style and treatment.

Neither is there any restriction as to the author, whether in respect of birth, place of education, or residence.

The reward will, as a rule, in each case be one thousand rupees; but it may be more, or it may be less, according to the merits of the work.

The Lieutenant-Governor will be prepared to give at least five such prizes in the coming year.

*Books suitable for the women of India will be especially acceptable, and well rewarded.*

The Government will ordinarily be prepared to aid in the publication of any meritorious work by subscribing for a number of copies. Such assistance will be exclusive of and in addition to the rewards now promised.<sup>6</sup>

Altaf Husain Hali, the great poet and biographer of Sir Syed Ahmad Khan, describes this announcement as one 'for which Hindustan will always be grateful.' He continues, 'Though the awards stopped after a few years, the effect of the announcement itself was like a current of electricity. It galvanized all the people who possessed, to whatever degree, the talent to

<sup>6</sup> *Allahabad Government Gazette* (India Office Records V/II/1248), pp. 349–50. Emphasis added. The author is grateful to Miss Maureen Patterson, formerly of the University of Chicago, for her help in obtaining a copy of the notice.

compose and compile in the vernacular, but did not know how to put it to good use.” It is difficult for us to establish the accuracy of Hali’s judgment—we do not have access to any list of either the applicants or the winners—but there is no denying the announcement’s significance from another perspective. Within the heartland of Urdu, it was the first and perhaps the most widely disseminated declaration of official support for ‘useful’ literature in general, and for books for women in particular. It also established the fact that the Government of India was the new patron of learning, that the patronized learning was to be put to use for the general good as conceived by it, and that it had the power not only to approve certain ideas through rewards and disapprove others through neglect, but also to disseminate the approved ones through the educational system—the books so favoured being purchased for libraries and prescribed for various examinations.

It is our purpose in this study to examine five Urdu books that won different prizes under the terms of this announcement. One of the five fell into oblivion rather quickly; another fared better, and went into at least three printings; the remaining three, all by one author, have stayed in print since they first appeared, two of them having been a part of the syllabi of instruction for many generations of Urdu speakers. We shall try to identify the reasons for their appeal, or non-appeal, to their British patrons and native readers. In that process we shall also compare them with such classics of *adab* as *Gulistân*, *Aklâq-i-Nâsirî*, and *Qâbûs Nâmâ*.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>7</sup> Altaf Husain Hali, *Hayât-i-Jâved* (Lahore, 1965), p. 323. Hali also suggests that the initial impulse for instituting such awards may have come from Sir Syed, who broached the subject in an address presented to Sir William Muir on behalf of the Scientific Society at Aligarh, on May 9, 1868.

<sup>8</sup> *Adab*, in contemporary Urdu means both ‘literature’ and ‘proper and polite behaviour.’ Here *adab* refers to a genre of books, and to the related belief that, in my view, is the hallmark of pre-modern Islamicate societies, that for every aspect of life and every human activity there exists a right

We begin with the book that gained the least success: *Natâ'ij-al-Ma'ânî* by Mirza Mahmud Beg Rahat, published at Agra in 1874.<sup>9</sup> Rahat was a Mughal from Delhi. He began his professional life as a soldier in Skinner's Regiment, later joined the service of Akbar Shah II (d. 1837) as the *'âmil* of a village, and finally became a confidant and courtier of Nawab Jahangir Muhammad Khan of Bhopal (d. 1844). After the Nawab's death, Rahat returned to Delhi to live a life of retirement, but the Mutiny of 1857 forced him to leave home again in search of patronage. We know that he went to Patiala and wrote a book of poems, some of them praising the local rulers, but apparently did not get what he desired. He died sometime before 1881.

While in Patiala, Rahat took his book of poems to a publisher, who agreed to publish it but advised him to abstain from such efforts and instead write a book 'in prose . . . in the clear language of everyday speech, with contents beneficial to the general public,' which could then be submitted to the authorities as per the Gazette Notification no. 791A. 'For then,' the publisher friend continued, 'the patronage of these ocean-hearted pearl-throwers and the munificence of these pearl-raining clouds in the sky of generosity, will remove that dust of unhappiness which the unappreciative-ness of the people of this age has cast on the mirror of your disposition.'<sup>10</sup> Rahat was quick to respond and very soon put together a book, containing some events that had happened to him as well as some

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and proper way—a protocol or ideal—be it rearing children or writing a letter, falling in love or being a courtier. Primary Islamicate languages—Arabic, Persian, and Turkish—have countless books of that nature. Their importance lies in that they set the ideals towards which the educated members of the society strove, or at the least thought that they did. For more on *adab*, see Barbara Daly Metcalf (Ed.), *Moral Conduct and Authority: The Place of Adab in South Asian Islam* (Berkeley, 1984).

<sup>9</sup> Mahmud Beg Rahat, *Natâ'ij-al-Ma'ânî*, ed. Gauhar Naushahi (Lahore: 1967). The biographical and bibliographical information presented here is based upon Professor Naushahi's valuable introduction.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid. p. 28. The printed text has two errors: '1891-A' for 791-A and 'August 1864' for August 1868. The source of the errors is not clear.



stories that he had heard. He called it *Natâ'ij-al-Ma'ânî* (Conclusions [full of] intrinsic qualities).

The book consists of sixty-seven stories arranged into five chapters, preceded by the traditional benedictory sections, including one honouring Queen Victoria, and followed by a short, prayerful conclusion. According to Rahat, the first chapter has stories dealing with the *'adl* (justice) of the rulers, the second, the *sakâvat* (generosity) of the wealthy, the third, the *sujâ'at* (bravery) of the soldiers, the fourth, the *câlâkî* (cunning) of officials and retainers (*ahl-i-kâr*) and thieves, and the fifth contains entertaining tales that 'earlier wits have told before nobles and kings.' At the end of most stories Rahat has added a *qit'a* of two couplets to point out the moral or 'conclusion' that is to be drawn from that tale. The stories are all quite entertaining, several of them describing events that happened to the author himself, but their edifying nature is often slightly dubious. His concluding couplets, therefore, often appear forced, and are of generally poor quality. That is somewhat surprising, inasmuch as Rahat was the disciple of no less a poet than Momin, and wrote better verse elsewhere. The prose of the stories exhibits some literary pretension, but not to an excessive degree. The language is closer to the prose of the storytellers of Fort William than to that of the *dâstân*-narrators of Lucknow. In that sense it is relatively simple and colloquial. Nevertheless, it is still the language of a learned man, who could not help but write as if for other men of worldly knowledge and experience.

The book did receive some reward, as is indicated in a publisher's note at the end, but perhaps only a nominal one, because no sum is indicated. No copies of the book were bought by the government, nor was it ever prescribed for any examination. The author, apparently, uses the *Gulistân* of Sa'di as his model, arranging his stories into chapters and adding aphoristic couplets at the end of each story. He writes with approval of such virtues as justice, generosity, bravery, presence of mind, sweetness of discourse, and the like—all well-known themes of *adab*—but his scope remains limited. He is neither

comprehensive nor sharply focused. His tales convince us that he must have been an excellent courtier, but by the same token he is not the kind of edifying author that the new educators would have approved of. He does not talk of useful new sciences; rather, he suggests a life in which the wisdom of age and experience counts for more. Even the Englishmen who appear in his tales appear as rulers and soldiers, in no way different from the Indian protagonists. The milieu of baronial courts and the celebratory tone in which it is—quite successfully—depicted by Rahat had little appeal for earnest English civil servants and eager Indian wage earners.

The next book to be discussed is '*Aql-o-Ṣa'ûr* (Intellect and Sagacity) by Maulavi Syed Nizamuddin, son of Maulavi Syed Amir Ali, probably of Lucknow, published in Lucknow in 1873 by the famous Newal Kishore Press.<sup>11</sup> According to an inscription on its title page, the book was awarded a prize of Rs. 300/-, and three hundred copies were bought by the government for its Department of Public Instruction. Another inscription, in English, runs: '*Aql-o-Shu'ur*, For Indian Girls, Boys, Ladies and Gentlemen.' Encyclopaedic in conception, it is an amazing cornucopia of both fact and fiction. Some idea of the ambition behind it, and the style of its execution, can be had from this excerpt from its preface.

Nizam, of humble name and little fame, begs to submit to his alert readers, the keen seekers of knowledge, that for a long time this recluse of the house of despair remained hidden behind seclusion's veil, and despite possessing a tongue of flame, cared little for fame, choosing to be mute like a candle. . . . The anguished heart shed many a tear, and the sickened soul was gripped with fear, lest the gale of ignorance extinguish the lamp of learning, plunging into darkness the heavens a-turning. A storm of indiscrimination raged on all sides; the barge of discernment sank out of sight. No one cared, none gave a hoot, to listen to men of merit, to give ear to their suit. I wept for my talent, so fine yet so battered; I cried out this verse as my hopes lay shattered.

<sup>11</sup> Syed Nizamuddin, '*Aql-o-Ṣa'ûr*, (Lucknow, 1914, 3rd. ed.).

*Whom can I show my mind, so gallant?*

*This age, alas, has no patron of talent.*

But Allah be praised, the notice issued by the English Government, so firm and determined, instigated me to add glory to my name, and gave me an occasion to indulge in expression, and for sooth obtain fame. Verily, the Nawab Lieutenant-Governor Bahadur acted like a messiah . . . Consequently, hoping for a reward, and bearing in my heart a desire for the general good, I began this book. . . .

The name of this treatise, full of merits, is '*Aql-o-Ṣa'ūr*. Its every phrase has a benefit, hidden, and its every chapter has a purpose, given. Without a doubt, it is an elixir for those who are parched for learning, and without any reservation it can be taught to ladies and children. The author has divided it into an Introduction, ten Chapters, and a Conclusion. The Introduction is called *Tajallī-i-Nūr* (Splendour of the Light), the Chapters are called '*Uqūl-i-aṣara* (The Ten Intellects) and the Conclusion is titled *Jauhar-i-Fard* (The Singular Substance). The meaning of Knowledge and Ignorance, the nature of Reason, single letters and compound phrases, the counsels of the wise and the advice of the learned, the rules of morphology and syntax, logic and ethics, rhetoric and prosody, refinements of speech and elegance of expression, Geography and History, Arithmetic and Geometry, Physics and Chemistry and Astronomy, marvels of the world and the world of fantasy, the history of the Freemasons, the secrets of mesmerism and electricity, the wonders of the steam-engine and telegraphy, electro-plating, compass, thermometer, photography, the art of calligraphy and drawing, letter-writing, horsemanship, swordsmanship, gymnastics and wrestling, disputation and debate, etc.—all of these subjects, subtly and carefully, have been transferred from the tablet of my heart to the surface of these pages.<sup>12</sup>

The above list is merely a summary of the contents. To enhance the fascinating quality of the book, the enterprising author has provided numerous line drawings, probably of his own making, to illustrate the text.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid. pp. 3–4.

The text is cast in the form of a tale, whose characters carry allegorical names. In the Land of Freedom, in the city called the Abode of Learning, ruled a king, whose name was Embodied Intellect. He had a son, Cherisher of Wisdom. When the prince reached the age of six, the king asked his five ministers to suggest some plan of education for him, and eventually accepted the advice of his fifth minister—a genie—called Word-Fathoming Sagacity. The minister then flew off to the region of Qaf to bring an old friend of his named Sage of the Age. It took this sage five years to instruct the prince in all branches of learning, and the king evaluated his progress in a public examination at the end of every six months. Thus each of the ten chapters is in two parts: in the first, the sage covers a range of topics as he instructs the prince; in the second, the prince ranges over a number of related—and not so related—subjects as he answers his examiners. At the end the king abdicates in favour of his son, the sage returns to his mountain peak, and we all live happily every after.

The book must have gained some popularity, for it went through at least three printings, the third in 1914. But it could not possibly have been a prescribed textbook in schools; its sales must have been to libraries and individual men, and they were boosted by the fact that the government bought three hundred copies for its own institutions. It does not have much in it to appeal to women and girls, who are, in fact, never mentioned in the text after the inscription in English on the title page. It is primarily a book for adult males, for the 'gentlemen' of the author's time, and it is easy to see its appeal for them.

First, in language and style it is not unlike the *dāstān* books that were extremely popular in that area at that time. Its narrative structure is that of a tale; its prose is flowery and rhyming, interspersed with verses in Persian and Urdu; and it makes use of many elements of the supernatural. Even its long lists of the names of flowers, foods, countries, and so on, are like those that the traditional storytellers were fond of

reeling off at any opportunity. It is a quest story—a quest for knowledge rather than a princess, in this case—and its prince-hero undergoes tests—not trials by fire, in this case, but public examinations, much like interviews for jobs.

Secondly, it contains basic information on a great many 'wonders' of Western civilization, such as the railway, telegraph, and photography, not to mention the Freemasons.

Thirdly, it does not denigrate the traditional branches of learning, such as prosody, letter-writing, and astrology. In fact, it delineates them in much detail.

Fourthly, it also purports to be a guide of a more practical nature, explaining to its readers how to do electroplating, make electric cells, take photographs, and survey land, activities not quite providing the *hunar* (skill) that a prince may need to possess to earn a living, but practical nevertheless. In spirit, of course, this is like what the princely author of *Qâbûs Nâma* had in mind when he taught his son how to be a musician, an astrologer, or even a merchant.

Fifthly, it is indeed the first book of its kind in Urdu: a compendium of 'useful information' for ordinary curious persons. If nothing else, it provides them with such exciting, though rudimentary, facts on a vast array of subjects as would add to their self-esteem and self-assurance in the company of the better educated.

Finally, even while celebrating the glories of '*aql* (intellect)—each of its chapters is called an '*aql*—it does not question any of the social or religious constructs of its time. Religion, society, science—they appear in a state of peaceful co-existence in this book. It does not challenge any of its readers' beliefs, nor even their superstitions. The '*ilm* (knowledge; science) of *tilismât* (supernatural mysteries) is as seriously dealt with as are the '*ulûm* of physics and astronomy. Its world view is traditional: theistic and hierarchical. Although its author carefully avoids making any overt mention of religion—there is hardly any quotation from the Qur'an or hadith—he takes the supreme authority of God as given. He is careful to tell us that there are two types of '*aql*: '*aql-i-*

*ma'âd* (the '*aql* of the hereafter), whose fruit shall be received after death, and '*aql-i-ma'âs* (the '*aql* of living), which is useful in this world. That he devotes his book entirely to the latter is, no doubt, due to his narrow interpretation of the condition in the Gazette Notification against 'theological treatises.' Likewise, though he declares that all classes of men should pursue '*ilm*, his book deals only with the '*ulûm* of the gentry. It contains, for example, no mention of such 'hand-soiling' occupations as agriculture and trade. Its ethics are similarly traditional. The author has incorporated in it material from numerous earlier books of *adab*, and constantly appeals to the authority of the past to underscore the validity of his remarks.

It must therefore have appeared as a near-perfect book to many of its gentlemen readers of that time who, secure in their religious beliefs and confident of their social habits, but curious about Western technical achievements, must have found it as much comforting as it was informative. As for the British, if they were not totally beguiled by its scientific airs, they were still right in giving some reward to a pioneering enterprise of such magnitude. Needless to say, as education spread and literary tastes changed, as the 'wonders' became commonplace and the traditional '*ulûm* lost their value in the job market, the same qualities eventually made the book quite irrelevant to the new gentry. What the new *ṣarîf* folk wanted was provided by Nazir Ahmad, three of whose many award-winning books will be considered below.

Nazir Ahmad (1830–1912) was a man of remarkable talent. Born in a family of maulavis and muftis of Bijnore, he studied Persian, Arabic, and other traditional subjects, first with his father, then later under other maulavis in Bijnore and Delhi. A chance encounter led to a scholarship to study at Delhi College, where he joined the Arabic class, studying calculus, trigonometry, algebra, geography, and natural philosophy, along with Arabic literature. That course of study lasted eight years. Because of the objection of his father, he did not study English at that time, but made up for it later. He began his

professional career as a maulavi of Arabic, but soon moved on to be a deputy inspector of schools in the Department of Public Instruction. Later, by displaying his genius in translating the Indian penal code into Urdu, he was nominated to the Revenue Service and became a deputy collector in the North-West Provinces. Still later, he rose to high administrative positions in Hyderabad state. Throughout his life, along with his professional work, he continued to write and translate. In the annals of Urdu literature he is deservedly given a very high position, not only for writing the first 'novel' in Urdu, but also for writing some of the most influential books in that language.<sup>13</sup>

The three books under consideration are his first three novels: *Mir'ât-al-'Arûs* (The Bride's Mirror), first published in 1869, *Banât-al-Na'ş* (The Daughters of the Bier), first published in 1872, and *Taubat-al-Nasûh* (The Repentance of Nasuh), first published in 1874.<sup>14</sup> Together they formed for him 'a syllabus for the instruction of women: *Mir'ât-al-'Arûs* for teaching household arts [*umûr-i-kâna-dârî*], *Banât-al-Na'ş* for teaching useful facts [*ma'lûmât-i-zurûrî*], and *Taubat-al-Nasûh* for teaching piety [*kudâ-parastî*].'<sup>15</sup>

*Mir'ât-al-'Arûs* (henceforward, *Mir'ât*) was begun in 1865–66 as a reader for his daughter and was completed in 1867–68. The book became very popular among the female

<sup>13</sup> The best and most comprehensive book on Nazir Ahmad is Iftikhar Ahmad Siddiqi, *Maulavî Nazîr Ahmad Dihlavî: Ahvâl-va-Âsâr* (Lahore: 1971). In English, one can consult with much benefit Muhammad Sadiq, *A History of Urdu Literature* (Delhi, 1984, 2nd revised edition), pp. 408–17, and Shaista Akhtar Banu Suhrawardy, *A Critical Survey of the Development of the Urdu Novel and Short Story* (London, 1945), pp. 41–65.

<sup>14</sup> I use the following editions: *Mir'ât-al-'Arûs* (Karachi, 1963); *Banât-al-Na'ş* (Lucknow, 1967); and *Taubat-al-Nasûh* (Lahore, 1964). The last, carefully edited by Iftikhar Ahmad Siddiqi under the auspices of Majlis-i-Taraqqi-i-Adab, also has a useful introduction.

<sup>15</sup> Nazir Ahmad, *Fasâna-i-Mubtalâ*, ed. Sadiqur Rahman Qidwai (New Delhi, 1971), preface, p. 9. There is some internal evidence to suggest that the series was planned.

relatives of the author. He even gave a copy of it to his daughter as part of her dowry. Later, it was submitted in competition, and in 1869, the first year of the awards, won for the author not only the full prize of one thousand rupees but also a watch as a personal token of appreciation from the lieutenant-governor. The government purchased two thousand copies of the book for its institutions and recommended its inclusion in school syllabi.

*Banât-al-Na'ş* (henceforward, *Banât*) followed in 1872 and won the prize of five hundred rupees. The author called it the second part of *Mir'ât*, but it was not a sequel.<sup>16</sup> It merely expanded upon some events that were briefly mentioned in the first book. In its preface, Nazir Ahmad said, '*Mir'ât* was intended to teach ethics [*aklâq*] and good housekeeping [*kâna-dârî*]. This book does the same, but only secondarily; its primary concern is with scientific knowledge [*ma'lûmât-i-ilmî*]. Now remains the topic of piety [*dîndârî*]. If time allows . . . that too, God willing, shall be presented next year.'<sup>17</sup>

He kept his word and presented for competition in 1873 his masterpiece, *Taubat-al-Nasûh* (henceforward, *Taubat*). It won him the first prize again, came out in 1874, and has never been out of print since. Matthew Kempson, the director of public instruction at that time, liked it so much that he translated it into English and published it in London in 1884.<sup>18</sup>

Both *Mir'ât* and *Taubat* have been a permanent part of the syllabi of Urdu schools from their first publication. *Mir'ât* has had many imitators, and its main motif of two sisters, one

<sup>16</sup> The title, lit., 'the daughters of the bier,' refers to a constellation of stars (Ursa Major); its significance is unclear. The author elsewhere described the book as 'a story like Sandford's.' See *Lekṣarôn kâ Majmû'a*, ed. Bashiruddin Ahmad (Agra, 1918), vol. 2, p. 438). Muhammad Sadiq notes that *Banât* was 'modelled' on the *History of Sandford and Merton* by Thomas Day (Sadiq, *A History*, p. 323). The resemblance is slight.

<sup>17</sup> *Banât*, p. 2.

<sup>18</sup> *The Repentance of Nussooh*, trans. M. Kempson (London: W. H. Allen and Co., 1884). It's an abridged translation. Kempson later also published a matching Urdu text. A reprint of the translation is forthcoming.



good and the other bad, has been used in innumerable novels and stories aimed at the female audience. It has been translated into several Indian languages,<sup>19</sup> and an English version came out in London in 1903.<sup>20</sup> *Taubat*, a superior and more complex book, has had no imitators, but it was itself an imitation of Daniel Defoe's *The Family Instructor*. Nazir Ahmad felt no need to acknowledge that fact, nor did his English admirers.<sup>21</sup> They were right. Borrowing the bare plot from Defoe, Nazir Ahmad made it his own by developing better, more believable characters and by creating a compelling air of authenticity through accuracy of description and naturalness of dialogue. By any measure, his book is a far superior work of creative imagination than Defoe's.

*Mir'ât*, in the days of its greatest popularity, was simply known as the story of Akbari and Asghari. These are two sisters living in Delhi: Akbari, the elder, married to a man named Muhammad Aqil, and Asghari, the younger, still living with her mother but engaged to be married to Aqil's younger brother, Muhammad Kamil. The fathers in both families live on their jobs, away from Delhi. Akbari is illiterate, ill-tempered, and absolutely without any talent. Soon after her marriage she demands a house of her own, but once installed, quickly manages to make a mess of it. Asghari, on the other hand, is literate, sweet-tempered, and multitalented. Before her marriage she runs her mother's house, and after her marriage, transforms the life in her husband's quarters. She first rids the house of a thieving maid, then slyly gets her hus-

<sup>19</sup> See A. S. Kalsi, 'The Influence of Nazir Ahmad's *Mirat al-'Arus* (1869) on the Development of Hindi Fiction,' in *Annual of Urdu Studies*, no. 7 (1990), pp. 31–44.

<sup>20</sup> *The Bride's Mirror*, trans. G. E. Ward (London: Henry Frowde, 1903). The descriptive title reads: 'A tale of domestic life in Dehli forty years ago.' Reprinted, New Delhi, 2001, with an afterword by Frances W. Pritchett.

<sup>21</sup> Sir William Muir's remark in his Preface to the English translation is quite apt: 'The tale is not the mere imitation of an English work, though it be the genuine product of English ideas.' (*The Repentance of Nussooh*, p. x.)

band to mend his ways and obtain a job. She starts a school for girls in her house, brings Akbari and Aqil back into the fold, and carefully arranges the marriage of her sister-in-law into a wealthy family.

Nazir Ahmad never explains just why the two sisters turned out to be so different from each other. He seems, however, to imply that while Akbari had taken after her mother, who remains nameless in the book, Asghari was like her father, appropriately named Durandesh Khan (Farsighted) and may have received proper instruction from him at an early age. They also correspond with each other, a fact that forcefully brings out the importance of literacy. Asghari's innate good nature, some proper upbringing, and a degree of education have made her a paragon of virtues. Just as her calmness never gives way to hysteria, so does her sharp mind never fail to come to her rescue. The most outstanding thing about her is her practical bent of mind [*hikmat-i-'amalī*]. She is a remarkably practical person and a meticulous planner. She dominates the book. Her own father and brother are only marginal characters, whereas the three male members of her husband's family have much to say and do in the book, yet all three of them are totally inept and impractical compared with her. She leads them and they follow. She is also shrewd enough to know when to be direct and when subtle. She is always right, and this does begin to annoy us. Because she is always serious and never invites us to laugh with her, we may catch ourselves inclined to laugh at her. That we do not quite do so is only a proof of Nazir Ahmad's success in impressing us with his ideal *ṣarīf* woman. Asghari was Nazir Ahmad's beloved heroine, and he had to write a second book, *Banāt*, to tell us all that he had wanted to tell about her.

*Banāt* is ostensibly the story of Husn Ara, a spoiled girl from a rich family, who is sent to Asghari for instruction. It presents Asghari as the ideal teacher. To underscore that role she is generally referred to as *ustânîjî* (lady teacher). An equally important role is also played by a protégée of hers, her sister-in-law Mahmuda. Together they inculcate good values

and habits in Husn Ara, and also expand her knowledge in terms of facts of geography, history, and general science. They also teach her and the other girls in Asghari's *maktab* how to cook, sew, and manage household budgets. The facts are conveyed through stories and interpolated comments; the skills are taught through playing with dolls and through small projects. *Banât* apparently presents Nazir Ahmad's ideal of a school for girls: run by an individual or two, catering to a small number of students (carefully selected for their aptitude), and self-supporting. The teacher receives no salary—as a *ṣarīf* lady, Asghari could not be expected to charge a fee. The girls do handicrafts, which are sold to raise funds for school expenses. As for the syllabus of this ideal school, Nazir Ahmad gives a detailed description of it at the end of *Banât*, when he describes what Husn Ara had learned in her approximately three years there.

When Husn Ara joined the *maktab* she was a little over ten years old. As her thirteenth year ended, the family in Jhajjar began to press for marriage. In the meantime, Husn Ara had learnt to read the Qur'an, and, since she regularly read two sections every day, knew it as if by heart. As for Urdu, she could read and write with no difficulty. Even her handwriting was fair. Urdu translation of the Qur'an, *Kanz-al-Musallâ*, *Qiyâmat Nâma*, *Râh-i-Najât*, *Vafât Nâma*, the story of the King of Rûm, the story of the *Sipâhîzâda*, the miracle of the King of Yemen, *Risâla-i-Maulûd Ṣarīf*, *Maṣâriq-al-Anvâr*—these were the religious books that she had read. In addition she had studied the fundamentals of arithmetic up to the fractions, the geography and history of India, *Ḥand Pand*, *Muntakab-al-Hikâya*, and *Mir'ât-al-'Arûs*. [All by Nazir Ahmad.] She could read Urdu newspapers. In addition to reading and writing, she had learned all the arts [*hunar*] that a woman needs to manage a household. She had also learned as many useful facts [*ma'lûmât-i-mufîda*] as would be sufficient to add comfort and pleasure to the rest of her life. But what she had learned from books was only a

thousandth part of what she had learned from Asghari and the other students.<sup>22</sup>

*Banât* begins with the arrival of Husn Ara at the *maktab* and ends with her departure, but it is not a chronicle of her educational progress. It is mainly concerned with the early days: how Asghari and Mahmuda slowly induced Husn Ara to give up her bad habits and gave her a taste of the fruits of education. These are the titles of some of the chapters: Husn Ara's contempt for the other girls and how Mahmuda cured her of it; Mahmuda makes Husn Ara understand that those who are rich are also the needier; Husn Ara begins to get up early; the meaning of true generosity; some fun with arithmetic; air pressure; magnetism; the need for civilization; some description of the English people; the geography of Arabia and the ways of the Bedouins.

Compared with *Mir'ât*, *Banât* is dull and merely didactic. It has no story to hold our attention. All through it, Nazir Ahmad, the deputy inspector of schools, is in the forefront; Nazir Ahmad, the novelist, displays himself only in some of the conversations where his command of the subtleties of feminine speech becomes evident. The book was rightly given a lesser award. Moreover, it has not been as popular, though it too has remained in print.

Two major concerns inspire most of Nazir Ahmad's fiction: the uplift of *ṣarīf* women and the proper upbringing of *ṣarīf* children. Together they form the foundation of what is critically important for him: the family. For him, the enrichment and fulfilment of the lives of individuals can take place only within the context of a family, within which each member has his or her share of responsibilities, that share determining the individual's worth. The uplift of an entire society, according to him, can come about only if its constituent members—the individual families—are first brought to a state of enlighten-

<sup>22</sup> *Banât*, p. 228.

ment. (Nazir Ahmad, of course, assumes society to be hierarchical, and focuses his attention on *ṣarīf* families.)

Sir Syed, the great educationist-reformer and a senior contemporary of Nazir Ahmad, in order to transform his Muslim compatriots, wanted to duplicate in Aligarh the corridors of Oxford and Cambridge—and perhaps also the cricket fields of Eton and Harrow. Nazir Ahmad, for the same purpose, sought to change the life in the courtyards and kitchens of ordinary homes, and frequently presented glimpses of English domesticity for the edification of his readers. What first-hand experience he had of it is not clear, probably very little and even that misunderstood, such as his understanding of the ‘royal powers’ of Queen Victoria, who is often mentioned in exaggerated terms in his novels. In *Banât* there is a long section describing the virtuous and happy life of an English family that bears little resemblance to reality. These people, however, serve a useful purpose in his scheme, just as does the English lady doctor in another novel. They provide strong, intelligent, and practical women as models for emulation.

Four of Nazir Ahmad’s seven novels are specifically concerned with the problems of women. *Mir’ât* and *Banât* deal with the difficulties caused by their lack of proper education, an area wherein, according to Nazir Ahmad, they were themselves mostly to be blamed. The other two books are concerned with the pain and suffering that their male-dominated society inflicts on them, by allowing men to have a second wife (*Muhsinât*, or *Fasâna-i-Mubtalâ*, 1885), and by not allowing widows to remarry (*Ayâmâ*, 1891). In each of these four novels, Nazir Ahmad presents at least one major female character who impresses us by being different from the prevalent image and self-image of Muslim women. These creations of Nazir Ahmad are amazingly dynamic people, possessing sharp and practical minds. In each instance, they are more competent, stronger, and more effective than almost all the male characters. Even the best of the men tend merely to preach. They have power and wield it, but we get the impres-

sion that if pressed to answer, these men may not be able to justify the authority and superiority they claim.

Nazir Ahmad holds that 'the cart of life cannot move an inch unless it has one wheel of man and another wheel of woman.' He writes,

No doubt God created woman a bit weaker than man, but He gave her hands and feet, ears and eyes, wit [*'aql*], understanding [*samajh*] and memory [*yâd*] equal to any man. The boys make use of these gifts and become *'âlim*, *hâfiz*, *hakîm*, craftsmen, artisans, experts in every art and craft. The girls waste their time in playing with dolls and listening to stories, and remain devoid of *hunar* (talent; art). However, those women who recognized the value of time and put it to good use became famous in the world just like men. For example, Nurjahan Begum, Zebunnisa Begum, or, as in our days, Nawab Sikandar Begum and Queen Victoria, who have run, not just some small household, but an entire country, even the world.<sup>23</sup>

He reminds women of the popular opinions held about them: women are faulty of intellect [*nâqis-al-'aql*]; women are crafty and sly; they are obstinate and fickle; if women [*zan*] had deserved any better they would have been called [*ma-zan*] (don't beat!) instead of *zan* (beat!). Seeing no hope for their relief from the seclusion of purdah, which would allow them knowledge through experience, he concludes that the only way for women to improve themselves is through education. 'Education has more importance for women than for men.'<sup>24</sup>

In giving such importance to women, in allowing them the inherent capacity to be coequal with men in almost all matters, and in laying such emphasis on women's education, Nazir Ahmad was going against the prevalent views. The greatest Muslim educator of that time, Sir Syed, wrote hardly anything concerning women and was in fact not in favour of 'wasting' any communal effort on their education. The education of

<sup>23</sup> *Mir'ât*, p. 15.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.* p. 25.

husbands and sons was of far greater importance to him. He believed that the benefits of education would eventually filter down through them to women. We are not suggesting that Nazir Ahmad's was a lone voice—there were many others who expressed sorrow at the plight of women—but it was certainly the most radical and far-reaching. The radical nature of Nazir Ahmad's ideas becomes clear when we compare them, on the one hand, with the views on women in such popular classics of *adab* as the *Qâbûs Nâma* (eleventh century; henceforward, *Qâbûs*) and the *Aklâq-i-Nâsirî* (thirteenth century; henceforward, *Aklâq*), and, on the other, with the opinions of Maulana Ashraf Ali Thanawi (1864–1943), a younger contemporary and one of the most influential Muslims of twentieth-century India.

The two medieval classics are,<sup>25</sup> of course, directed toward men. They pay attention to women only insofar as men need wives to perpetuate their line and look after domestic chores; problems also arise because men sire daughters as well as sons. Although these treatises allow that women can be chaste and kind, thrifty and efficient, and adorned with wit and honesty—for these are the qualities to be preferred in a wife—the underlying attitude is somewhat misogynistic. Although women can be the best of friends, they can also be the worst of enemies (*Qâbûs*). Women cannot be trusted, so one should not share one's secrets with them, nor should one consult them in every matter (*Aklâq*). You should not marry a wealthy woman, for she will look down upon you, nor a beautiful woman, for she will be faithless, nor a non-virgin, for she will tend to compare you with other men all the time (*Qâbûs* and *Aklâq*). Do not give yourself into the hands of your wife though she may be a paragon of virtue and beauty (*Qâbûs*). Do not fall in love with your wife, but if you do, hide it from her (*Aklâq*).

<sup>25</sup> Kaikaus Ibn Iskandar, *Qâbûs Nâma*, ed. Sa'id Nafisi (Teheran, 1342 Shamsi), pp. 95–99; Nasir ad-Din Muhammad at-Tusi, *Aklâq-i-Nâsirî* (Lahore, 1952), pp. 212–21.

As for daughters, according to *Qâbûs*, they are better not born, but if born, they should be either by the side of a husband, or in the lap of a grave. Their education is to be limited to domestic chores and the rites of religion. Interestingly, whereas the earlier book, *Qâbûs*, is not against women being taught how to read, the later one, *Aklâq*, is bluntly against it. As for learning how to write, that is forbidden by both. Writing is perhaps seen as a more active and dynamic expression of the self and the intellect than mere reading, and women are not considered to have either in a positive sense. It is significant that in both the books the first instruction concerning sons is that they should be given good names. This does not obtain in the case of daughters.

Maulana Ashraf Ali Thanawi's *Bihishti Zavar* is directed toward Muslim women, and may be the first book of its kind in Islamic *adab* literature.<sup>26</sup> First published in 1905, it was written at a time when female education was rapidly making progress in India, and Muslim women themselves were playing an active role in that process. Whereas Nazir Ahmad had intended his novels to be useful to all women, Thanawi is concerned with the needs of Muslim women alone. According to Thanawi, women, through their actions, affect not *only* their children, but also their husbands; thus what they do or do not affects the society as a whole. He then reasons:

Poor faith [*bad i'tiqâdî*] gives birth to bad ethics [*bad aklâqî*], bad ethics produce bad actions [*bad a'mâlî*], bad actions lead to bad interaction with others [*bad mu'âmalagî*], which is the root of all evil in the society. Since the opposite of something is its antidote, it is evident that the cure in this case is the knowledge of religion [*'ilm-i-dîn*].<sup>27</sup>

<sup>26</sup> Muhammad Ashraf Ali Thanawi, *Bihishti Zavar* (Lahore, n.d.). The edition used here is popularly known as the *Taj Bihishti Zavar*, after its publishers, Taj Company Ltd., Lahore. Based on the definitive edition published by Maulana Shabbir Ali in 1925, it differs in pagination and some arrangement of the text.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid. sec. 1, p. 3.



Accordingly, his syllabus for women includes the Qur'an (vocalizing of the Arabic, and understanding of the Urdu translation), rules of *fiqh* insofar as they concern women, and some essentials of domestic bookkeeping, health care, cooking, and other such things. No history or geography for him, nor the wonders of the heavens. According to him, women should be taught how to read, for that will improve their language, strengthen their faith, and make them better homemakers. As for the art of writing, it has its uses too, such as keeping of accounts and communicating through letters, but it should be taught only to those who are not overly bold [*be-bâk*] by nature. Otherwise it may be harmful. 'After all,' he concludes, 'writing should not be more dear to you than your honour [*âbrû*].'<sup>28</sup>

Thanawi is against the newly opened *zanâna* (all female) schools and the books that were taught there. He strongly disapproves of the newly emerging 'feminine' literature, including the four novels of Nazir Ahmad mentioned above. Near the end of *Bihishtî Zavar*, he lists the names of some 'harmful' books and includes the four novels. He then adds: 'These four books contain some discourses that teach discernment [*tamîz*] and proficiency [*salîqa*], but they also contain discourses that weaken faith [*dîn*].'<sup>29</sup> Inasmuch as Thanawi does not elaborate further, we can only speculate about the objections he may have raised. The obvious ones would be: (1) Nazir Ahmad's equating of Islam with other religions; (2) his praise of the Christian English at the cost of Muslim Indians; (3) his making fun of certain types of *maulavîs*. But we will not be far wrong, perhaps, if we add to that list (4) his depiction in the two later novels of the sensual aspects of marital ties and the emotional needs of women and (5) his portrayal of highly capable and dynamic women, who tower over the men around them.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid. p. 80.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid. sec. 10, p. 54.

As noted earlier, Nazir Ahmad is concerned with Muslim women's lot as a whole, and not merely with the corruption of their religion. He believes in the efficacy of education as a given universal, and feels no need to anchor his espousal of it in the Qur'an and hadith, as does Thanawi. Nazir Ahmad sees women as victims of their own lack of initiative as well as of the unmitigated authority of men, and champions their cause. He perhaps feels very close to them; he portrays them well in his novels. He feels no need to improve their language; in fact, it is his command of their idiom that makes his dialogues ring so true. With reference to women, Nazir Ahmad displays an attitude and expresses opinions that must have appeared radical to the orthodox of his time. It would be wrong, however, to think of him as one who took his religion lightly. On the contrary, Nazir Ahmad stresses again and again that religion—any religion—has to be at the core of a person's being, to generate for him or her the values to live by. Within the context of Islam, that is Thanawi's belief too. It is no surprise, then, to find him giving full approval to Nazir Ahmad's third novel, *Taubat-al-Nasûh*: he lists it among the books it would be beneficial for women to read.<sup>30</sup>

In his preface to *Taubat*, Nazir Ahmad declares:

In this book we discuss that duty of mankind which is called 'the upbringing of children' . . . [which] does not amount merely to giving them nourishment so that they grow big, or teaching them some profession so that they can earn a living, or arranging their marriages, but also includes the polishing of their morals [*aklâq*], the improvement of their dispositions [*mizâj*], the reform of their habits [*'âdât*], and the correction of their ideas and beliefs [*kayâlât aur mu'taqidât*].

Further:

<sup>30</sup> Ibid. sec. 10, p. 53. I am indebted to Professor Barbara D. Metcalf for bringing Thanawi's comments to my attention.

My intention was to prove to people the importance of instruction in good ways and fine morals, and do so without underscoring religion [*bilâ takṣīs-i-mazhab*].<sup>31</sup> But to separate goodness [*neki*] from religion would be like trying to separate the soul from the body, the fragrance from the flower, the light from the sun.

He then goes on to stress that though his book was not without religious discourses, it contained nothing that could hurt the religious sentiments of other communities. 'Thus, though the story is about a Muslim family, even the Hindus, by changing a few words, can benefit from it.'<sup>32</sup>

*Taubat* is about Nasuh, a *sharīf* Muslim of Delhi, and his attempts to reform the ways and manners of his family members by inculcating in them a deep respect for their religion, its rituals as well as its ethics. Nasuh takes on this task after himself going through a radical transformation under traumatic circumstances. In a cholera epidemic, Nasuh loses his father and another relative; soon afterward he, too, falls ill. On his sickbed, he is filled with self-pity at having to die when he still has so many things to take care of in this world. As the doctor's medicine puts him to sleep, Nasuh has a dream: he sees himself as if present in the *kaḥrī* (court of justice) of God. There he encounters his deceased father, who tells him of the exactitude and severity of God's judgment, and the need to inspire one's acts on Earth with the true sense of piety in order to fully discharge the individual and social responsibilities laid down upon mankind by his Creator. Recovering from the illness, Nasuh launches his campaign. He finds a willing ally in his wife, Fahmida, who had already had a poignant and instructive encounter with their younger daughter, Hamida. The older daughter, Naima, however, does not take to religion easily. She goes off to stay with an aunt, whose religious household eventually has the desired effect on her. Of the sons, the younger two, Alim and Salim, accept Nasuh's pro-

<sup>31</sup> Lit., '... without particularizing any religion.'

<sup>32</sup> *Taubat*, pp. 5–8.

gram readily, because they had already found influencing factors outside their own family: in one case, a book of moral principles given by a Christian missionary, and in the other, the company of a poor but pious schoolmate and his mother. It is the eldest son, Kalim, who proves to be the most obstinate. He challenges the authority of his father and the importance of religion in one's life. He runs away from home, has several misadventures, and returns repentant, but dying. With his death ends the book.

It is not our purpose here to provide a critique of *Taubat* as a novel; we are concerned only with the didactic aspirations of the book. To that extent, it will suffice to look closely at only one major theme: the tussle between the reforming old-new and the recalcitrant young-old, represented by the father and the son respectively. Nasuh is older in age, and exercises his traditional authority as the father; his emphasis on religion can also be called old-fashioned. But his reforming efforts are directed at such cherished cultural values as he had himself lived by until that eventful dream. These same values, however, are obstinately held onto by Kalim, his father's son in more ways than Nasuh realizes.<sup>33</sup> In fact, Kalim sees no reason for change. He is already living by the values a person of his background and position—i.e. a *ṣarīf* young man—is expected to have, with the full knowledge and, therefore, tacit approval of his father. He is popular as a poet. He is ranked high among the players of chess, backgammon, cards, and other games. His pigeons are among the best in the city, and none can beat him in a kite-flying match. He is well-read, and he can write well. As he tells his mother, 'Just as there are other sons of respected and *ṣarīf* families, so am I one. If I am not better than all, I certainly am not worse than any.'<sup>34</sup> He regards his father's demands as unfair, and leaves home to seek his fortune on the strength of the talents he possesses and cherishes.

<sup>33</sup> Kalim's obstinacy in his ways is identical with Nasuh's rigidity in his reforming zeal. Both need some traumatic experience to make them change.

<sup>34</sup> *Taubat*, pp. 179–80.

He leaves British India and goes to a small native state, and when his poetry does not get him far, he becomes a soldier, only to be badly wounded in his first skirmish. He is sent back to Delhi, where he dies, finally repentant, at his sister's house. In contrast to him, his 'reformed' younger brothers do very well indeed: one gets a job in the Education Department, the other becomes a practitioner of *yūnānī* medicine.

Kalim is by no means an uneducated person; on the contrary, he is well-read in Persian and Urdu classics. We are told that he is popular in the city as a poet. In his conversation, Kalim is shown as constantly quoting poetry. He thinks poetry adds force to his arguments, and marks him as an educated man. In a clear sense he lives up to his name. But Nazir Ahmad has only contempt for that kind of 'education'; he regards it as useless for this world and harmful for the other. In his authorial voice, he says: 'Kalim was cursed with poetry' [*kalīm par ṣā'irī kī phitkār thī*].<sup>35</sup>

As for the books that Kalim had read and collected, Nazir Ahmad has Nasuh destroy them in what must be one of the most horrifying scenes in Urdu novels. After Kalim has left the house, Nasuh inspects his rooms, and finds a large cabinet full of books in Urdu and Persian. They consist of 'false tales, foolish discourses, obscene ideas, vulgar subjects, all far removed from decency and goodness.'<sup>36</sup> And so he has the full cabinet dragged outside and burnt to ashes. What Lord Macaulay had only hinted at in his famous Minute, Nazir Ahmad has Nasuh put into action. That conflagration symbolizes, more than anything else, the rejection of the 'old' by the

<sup>35</sup> *Taubat*, p. 265. When Kalim arrives at Daulatabad, ready with a panegyric, he finds that the English have curbed the powers of its wastrel ruler and set up an administrative council of pious and competent people. Kalim then signs up in the army, a foolish decision made out of vanity, which, Nazir Ahmad declares, is 'another accursed habit of poets (p. 326).'

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.* p. 253. Nazir Ahmad's opinion of classical Urdu literature, particularly poetry, was not different from that of his contemporary Hali, who described it in his *Musaddas* as being 'worse in stench than a latrine' [*afūnat men sandās se hai jo badtar*].

'new,' of literary excellence in favour of social usefulness, of 'metaphor' in favour of 'realism.' It must have left an indelible mark on the minds of many generations, for nearly seventy years went by before anyone found fault with Nasuh and saw Kalim as a victim of circumstances, as a 'strange mixture of good and evil.'

In his preface to *Taubat*, Nazir Ahmad quotes the following verse (33:72) from the Qur'an:

Lo! We offered the trust unto the heavens and the earth and the hills, but they shrank from bearing it and were afraid of it. And man assumed it. Lo! he hath proved a tyrant and a fool.<sup>37</sup>

In a footnote, Nazir Ahmad explains 'trust' to mean '*aql*', variously translated as intellect or reason. It is the loss of this '*aql*' that has led, according to Nazir Ahmad, to the dreadful state in which the Muslims of India find themselves. The rise of the British, conversely, is due to their making full use of their '*aql*'. In *Banât*, Asghari tells her girls: 'The British are embodiments of '*aql*', otherwise they couldn't have come here, thousands of miles from their home, and become kings.'<sup>38</sup> Nazir Ahmad is nonetheless devoutly religious, having come to his faith after a period of anguish and doubt in his youth.<sup>39</sup> Faced with the question of reconciling religion with reason, he shows his characteristic inclination to be practical: he ignores it, at least in these three prize-winning books.<sup>40</sup>

<sup>37</sup> Muhammad Marmaduke Pickthall, *The Meaning of the Glorious Qur'an* (Mecca, 1977), p. 450. This particular verse has been used by any number of Muslim thinkers and reformers in South Asia, including Muhammad Iqbal, who equated the 'trust' with his concept of the Self [*kudî*].

<sup>38</sup> *Banât*, p. 198.

<sup>39</sup> Master Ram Chandra, Nazir Ahmad's favourite teacher at Delhi College, a Hindu, had converted to Christianity in 1852; it has been suggested that Nazir Ahmad very nearly followed suit. Siddiqi, *Maulavî*, pp. 66–68.

<sup>40</sup> Later in his life, Nazir Ahmad translated the Qur'an into Urdu and also wrote a more formal *adab* book, *al-Huqûq-va-al-Farâ'iz*, (in three parts). The former soon became quite popular; the latter never caught on. His translation shuns the kind of 'rationalism' that Sir Syed pursued in his

Consequently, these books are readily acceptable to the average Indian Muslim, who can easily see that he requires '*aql*', to succeed in this world, and religion [*dîn*], to redeem him in the hereafter. If religion leads to good habits, which in turn lead to success here, so much the better for religion. In fact it may appear that success and rewards are of decisive importance in Nazir Ahmad's vision. He wants his readers to receive their due reward on this earth as well as in heaven. After all, he makes a point of letting us know the heights of success his 'good' people do reach.

In Khanum's Bazar there stands a huge mansion built by Asghari. In fact, the neighbourhood is named after her. That lofty mosque in Jauhari Bazar that has a well and a tank was built by her too, as was the entire colony of Tamizgunj. In Maulavi Hayat's mosque, twenty travellers are fed daily through her generosity. She also built that *sarde* for travellers in Qutb Sahib. It was she who distributed five hundred copies of the Qur'an in one day in the mosque of Fatehpuri, and it is from her house that one thousand blankets are given to the poor every winter.<sup>41</sup>

Compared with the achievements of Asghari, the heroine of the '*aql*' books, the success of Nasuh's 'good' children is not especially outstanding, but nevertheless, success it is.

Before it all happened, Alim was having a hard time passing even the Entrance examination. Now, however, he passed his B.A. One excellent job after another was offered to him, but he, due to his good nature, chose the Department of Education, so he could be of benefit to his compatriots. The other son, Salim, when he grew up, became a *tabîb* of such eminence that even now the finest *tabîbs* of Delhi practice medicine using his prescriptions. As for Hamida, that saint-from-birth, she memorized the Qur'an and studied the hadith.

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own commentary on the Qur'an. Despite his very high regard for Sir Syed, Nazir Ahmad was consistently critical of his exegetical ideas.

<sup>41</sup> *Mir'ât*, p. 77.

Indeed, all the interest in education that you see among women of the city, is entirely due to Bi Hamida.<sup>42</sup>

What is also noteworthy here is a certain apparent split or separation. *'Aql*, guide to the steam-engine, telegraph, and efficient households, is extolled in *Mir'ât* and *Banât*. There is no mention in them of the need to say one's prayers regularly. The prayers are highlighted in *Taubat* which, in its turn, stays away from the wonders of modern science. The Qur'an, the Word of God, and Nature, the Work of God, are pragmatically kept separate. Unlike his great contemporary Sir Syed, Nazir Ahmad feels no need to demonstrate a tight fit between the two, at least not in these three books, his most popular ones. Here the natural world and the world of the supernatural seem to exist in perfect harmony, neither encroaching upon the territory of the other—a reassuring concept for the average Muslim then, as it is now.

The medieval classics display a more holistic attitude. Beginning with the concept of the Oneness of God, they extend it to perceive unity within all phenomena. They develop a concept of *'isq* (Passion; Love) to describe what they perceive as an interrelationship between all beings as well as between their multifarious expressions of themselves. Such *'isq* finds no mention in these novels of Nazir Ahmad, nor, for that matter, in Thanawi's book.<sup>43</sup> Similarly, the earlier books, written for the nobility, came out of societies where the temporal authority was a part of the community of believers: the world belongs to God, and the country and command belong to the king, but the king himself can be said to be a 'slave of Allah.' Nazir Ahmad, on the other hand, writes for the emerging middle and lower-middle classes of wage-earners in a society where, not too long ago, the cry of the town crier used to be:

<sup>42</sup> *Taubat*, pp. 347–48.

<sup>43</sup> It appears again later in the writings of Muhammad Iqbal (1877–1938), who equates the Qur'anic 'trust' with his concept of *kudî* or the Self, and makes Passion [*'isq*] the Self's vital force.



'The created world [*kalq*] belongs to God, the country [*mulk*] to the King, and the command [*hukm*] to the Company Bahadur.'

To conclude, these novels of Nazir Ahmad are just the right kind of success stories that the *sarīf* Muslims of India needed to hear in the trying years after the failure of the Mutiny and the dissolution of all symbols of their temporal power. Separating the world of God from the world of Caesar—in effect though not, perhaps, in intention—and suggestive of an Islamic version of the Protestant ethic of success, these novels are precisely the kind of *adab* that both the rulers and the ruled seem to have desired at that particular time in history. This explains their phenomenal success.

# Mughal and English Patronage of Urdu Poetry: A Comparison\*

*'A Poet is one who earns his living from poetry.'*  
Ghulam Hamdani Mushafi, Urdu Poet, 1748–1824

This essay intends to examine the relationship between Urdu poets and their patrons during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, particularly noting the changes that occurred in the parameters of patronage when symbolic, as well as actual, power changed hands from the Mughals to the British. I shall do so by considering in some detail the careers of Muhammad Taqi Mir (1723–1810), Asadullah Khan Ghalib (1797–1869), and Muhammad Husain Azad (1830–1910). The first two are considered the two greatest Urdu poets of the pre-modern period, while the third's role was seminal in the creation of modern poetry and literary criticism in Urdu. Before turning to these writers, however, I would like to draw upon some much earlier, classical sources on the subject of poetry and patrons and also look at the interaction between Persian language poets and some earlier Mughal kings. In this initial section I shall look into two books of protocol (*adab* literature) in order to obtain more explicit statements of the image and roles that the poets in the Islamic/Persian tradition seem to have adopted for themselves.

The eleventh-century writer Kaikavus Ibn Iskandar in his fascinating book *Qâbûs Nâma* (composed in 1082) lists

\* Originally published in *The Powers of Art: Patronage in Indian Culture*, ed. Barbara Stoler Miller (New Delhi, 1992), pp. 259–276.

poetry as one of the useful and worthy arts that his son—to whom the book was addressed—could learn in order to gain a living.<sup>1</sup> He first indicates the qualities that poetry in general should have—e.g. simple, not convoluted, diction; prominent use of metaphors—then has a few specific remarks concerning poems in praise of patrons. ‘Say in praise what befits the one who is praised. If someone has never even held a kitchen knife, don’t declare that his sword has cut through a tiger’s neck. . . .’<sup>2</sup> The author’s practical bent of mind, however, soon asserts himself and he adds: ‘But the poet must know well what his [patron] desires and enjoys; he should then praise him accordingly. For if you don’t say what he wants, he won’t give you what you desire.’<sup>3</sup> He also goes on to suggest that the poet should keep a pleasing countenance and learn a large number of curious and entertaining anecdotes to repeat before his patron, ‘for the poet has no way out of doing so.’ Kaikavus does not illustrate his recommendations with anecdotes, nor does he offer any rationale as to why someone must patronize poets. But he makes it clear that a poet gains his subsistence through his talent in poetry, not merely as a writer of panegyrics but also as a master of other genres. A poet pleases his patron in many ways, and a certain degree of talent for poetry is quite useful for anyone aspiring to be a companion to kings.

The author of *Qābūs Nāma*, however, was not a poet himself; he was merely a petty feudal chief. His main concern was to give practical advice to his son and, for his purposes, being a poet was as good a way to earn money and security as was trading. In fact, in his list of desirable professions, trading comes first, followed by medicine, astrology, and poetry, in that order. For a different perspective, we may turn to a book

<sup>1</sup> Kaikavus Ibn Iskandar, *Qābūs Nāma*, ed. Amin Abd al-Majid Badavi (Tehran, 1963). An English translation also exists: *A Mirror for Princes*, tr. Reuben Levy (London, 1951).

<sup>2</sup> Iskandar, *Qābūs Nāma*, p. 173.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

written by a poet: *Caḥār Maqāla* of Nizami 'Aruzi of Samarqand (written c. 1152).<sup>4</sup>

Nizami's book is addressed to kingly patrons in general and delineates for them the four special people that kings, in his opinion, must have about them to help them take care of the responsibilities of sovereignty. 'Now of the special ministers of Kings,' Nizami declares in his Introduction, 'are the Secretary, the Poet, the Astrologer, and the Physician, and these can in no wise be dispensed with. For the maintenance of the administration is by the Secretary, the perpetuation of immortal renown by the Poet; the ordering of affairs by the Astrologer; and the health of the body by the Physician.'<sup>5</sup>

Nizami returns to this matter of the 'perpetuation of immortal renown' in his chapter on Poets and declares that 'a king cannot dispense with a good poet. . . . for when the king receives that command which none can escape, no trace will remain of his army, his treasure, and his store; but his name will endure forever by reason of the poet's verse.'<sup>6</sup> He then mentions some poets whose writings had kept alive in their readers' memory the names of the deceased rulers of the Samanid and Ghaznavid dynasties. He does not, however, give any example in which a king was made famous in his lifetime by some poet's panegyrics. One doubts very much if any king ever thought of posterity and immortality in his dealings with a poet. The benefits he obtained were definitely more immediate: entertainment and good company. This becomes clear from the anecdotes that Nizami uses to illustrate his discourse.

<sup>4</sup> Nidhami-i-'Arudi-i-Samarqandi, *Caḥār Maqāla*, tr. Edward G. Browne, 'E.J.W. Gibb Memorial' Old Series XI.2 (London, 1978, Reprint).

<sup>5</sup> Ibid. p. 21. It may be pointed out that the order of precedence in *Qābūs Nāma*, in so far as it is indicated by the ordering of chapters, is as follows: trading, medicine, astrology, poetry, music, retainership, companionship, secretarial duties. But it can also be read as progressing in importance, for the next three chapters deal with ministership, commanding of soldiers, and kingship, in that order. On the other hand, the last two chapters are on farming and sufism! Also see note 12 below.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid. p. 45.

And these he introduces by declaring that 'in the service of kings naught is better than improvisation, for thereby the king's mood is cheered, his receptions are made brilliant, and the poet himself attains his object.'<sup>7</sup> 'Improvisation,' he adds, 'is the chief pillar of the Poetic Art; and it is incumbent on the poet to train his talents to such a point as to be able to improvise on any subject, for thus is money extracted from the treasury, and thus can the king be made acquainted with any matter which arises.'<sup>8</sup>

The examples which follow all illustrate the effectiveness of impromptu composition or apt quotation of poetry, and the reward they bring to the poet. Most of the anecdotes are too long and elaborate. We can quote here only a shorter one which also happens to conclude with an observation important for our purpose. It seems that the Ilak Khani ruler Sultan Khidr b. Ibrahim of Turkistan (fl. 1079–95) had a number of poets at his court. Of these, Amir Am'aq was the poet-laureate, while another poet named Rashidi was second in rank. One day, in Rashidi's absence, the Sultan asked Am'aq his opinion of Rashidi's verse. Am'aq replied, 'His verse is extremely good and chaste and correct, but it wants spice.' Later when Rashidi arrived, the Sultan teased him by repeating to him what Am'aq had said, then asked him to compose something in response. Rashidi immediately came up with the following:

*You stigmatize my verse as 'wanting spice,'  
And possibly, my friend, you may be right.  
My verse is honey-flavoured, sugar-sweet,  
And spice with such could scarcely cause delight.  
Spice is for you, you blackguard, not for me,  
For beans and turnips is the stuff you write.'*

<sup>7</sup> Ibid. p. 51.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid. p. 58.

Nizami writes: 'In this audience of Khidr Khan's there were set four trays of red gold, each containing two hundred and fifty dinars; and these he used to dispense by the handful. On this day he ordered Rashidi to receive all four trays, so he obtained the highest honour, and became famous. *For just as a patron becomes famous by the verse of a good poet, so do poets likewise achieve renown by receiving a great reward from the king, these two things being interdependent.*'<sup>9</sup>

We may, therefore, draw the following conclusions from Nizami's discourse on Poets. (1) Patrons gain a place in posterity by having their names mentioned in the works of excellent poets. (2) They also gain a name for themselves by giving generous rewards to poets, not only in their own times but also later, when anecdotes about them are narrated in books. (3) Poets not only gain a good livelihood from their patrons, they also gain status and fame, even a place in history. (4) Poets please their patrons in several ways: by writing panegyrics in their praise; by writing other poems as requested; by being quick-witted and entertaining; and by being able to improvise apt verses at the shortest notice. What is not so explicitly indicated but which can be seen clearly in several of Nizami's anecdotes is the fact that most poets carried a fairly strong image of themselves. Nizami, being a poet, was of course writing not without considerable self-interest. But the inference we are drawing is amply supported by biographical dictionaries [*tazkirât*; sg. *tazkira*] and other sources. Though the poets knew well enough who held the purse-strings, they were not generally prone to cringe or beg. They could demand a degree of respect. And they were often feared; most of them could disparage a person as eloquently as they could praise him. For, as the author of *Qâbûs Nâma* put it, 'the obverse of praise is dispraise.'<sup>10</sup> We may conclude this section by recalling the well-known Persian verses of Anvari (d. c. 1152), who wrote to a patron:

<sup>9</sup> Ibid. pp. 76-7. Emphasis added.

<sup>10</sup> *Qâbûs Nâma*, p. 173.

*Hopeful poets write three poems in all:  
the first, to praise the patron; the second, to prompt.  
Then comes the third—to thank, if the patron gave,  
or if he did not, to pour upon him ridicule.  
Of these, dear sir, I have written two;  
for the third, you tell me what I should do.'*<sup>11</sup>

Akbar (r. 1556–1605), with whom properly begins the long Mughal rule in India, patronized poets as befitted his role as a king. He established the title of *Malik-al-Su'arâ* (poet-laureate) at his court and bestowed it first on Ghazali, a poet from Iran, then later on Faizi, the elder brother of Abul Fazl, the author of *Â'in-i-Akbarî*. According to Abul Fazl, fifty-nine poets were presented at the court at one time or another, while there were many others who sent panegyrics to Akbar from distant places.<sup>12</sup> But Akbar was not as fond of poetry as he was of histories and tales. There is only one major poetic work directly connected to his patronage, the *Nal Daman* of Faizi. Faizi, the poet-laureate, however, received only the rank of '400 horsemen,' whereas his younger brother Abul Fazl, the philosopher-statesman, historian and prose stylist, rose to the rank of '2500.'

Akbar had his doubts about much of non-didactic poetry. Abul Fazl, in his own elegant style, puts it this way: 'Poets strike out a road to the inaccessible realm of thought, and divine grace beams forth in their genius. But many of them do not recognize the high value of their talent, and barter it away

<sup>11</sup> Quoted in Shibli Nu'mani, *Si'r-al-'Ajam*, vol. I (Azamgarh, 1972, Reprint), pp. 249–50.

<sup>12</sup> Abu 'L-Fazl 'Allami, *Â'in-i-Akbarî*, tr. H. Blochman, 2nd edition revised by D. C. Phillott (Calcutta, 1939), p. 617 ff. Abul Fazl divides the people of the world into four categories: warriors, artificers and merchants, the learned, and husbandmen. That fourfold division also appears at the royal court: nobility, collectors and paymasters, learned companions, and servants. According to Abul Fazl, poets belong to the third class, at the head of which stands the philosopher (presumably Abul Fazl himself). Poets come after physicians and astronomers, but before soothsayers.

from a wish to possess inferior store: they pass their time in praising the mean-minded, or soil their language with invectives against the wise. If it were not so, the joining of words were wonderful indeed; for by this means lofty ideas are understood. . . . For this reason his Majesty does not care for poets; he attaches no weight to a handful of imagination. Fools think that he does not care for poetry, and that for this reason he turns his heart from the poets.'<sup>13</sup>

Akbar's own words, faithfully recorded elsewhere by Abul Fazl, are more succinct. 'Since the poet builds on fiction,' Akbar is said to have remarked, 'his creation cannot be seriously accepted.'<sup>14</sup> Also, 'A rope-dancer performs with feet and hands, a poet with his tongue.' The fact that he enjoyed some poetry, however, is indicated by a third recorded remark: 'He who happily introduces the verses of another in his own compositions or appositely quotes them, discovers the other's merit and his own.' It is interesting to note that the first two remarks of Akbar's reflect an attitude towards poetry similar to that of the author of *Qâbûs Nâma*. It was, in fact, one of his favourite books—he had it read to him several times.

Akbar's son Jahangir (r. 1605–28) was much more interested in poetry and his *Tuzuk* contains specific references to the poets at his court. He notes the occasions when he rewarded certain poets and also quotes their verses. Shahjahan (r. 1628–59), too, continued the practice of appointing poets-laureate and was a great deal more appreciative of the poetic arts than was his grandfather. Jahangir and Shahjahan even had some poets weighed in gold. Thus we find the better poets of the times of Jahangir and Shahjahan to be at the court, whereas in Akbar's times, most of the better poets were patronized either by his nobles or by the rulers in the Deccan. As for perpetuating their immortal renown, Akbar turned to his non-poet favourite, Abul Fazl, while Jahangir wrote his

<sup>13</sup> Ibid. pp. 617–18.

<sup>14</sup> Abul Fazl - 'Allami, *Ā'in-i-Akbarī*, vol. III, tr. H. S. Jarrett, revised by Jadunath Sarkar (Calcutta, 1948), p. 432. Also the next two quotations.



own memoirs; only Shahjahan turned to his poet-laureate and asked him to write a history of his times—in verse! The same poet is said to have protected his patron's honour on one occasion by pointing out that the King was right to call himself Shahjahan (King of the World), for the numerical values of *hind* (India) and *jahân* (world) were the same.<sup>15</sup> None of the three Mughal patrons, however, was a poet himself—none needed an *ustâd* to correct his verses or even write verses in his name. On the other hand, Jahangir considered himself a keen expert and there are several stories of his correcting poets' work. Such expertise was particularly true of Hakim Abul Fath and Abdur Rahim Khan-i-Khanan, Akbar's nobles, who were seen by the poets they patronized as truly their *murabbî*—as patrons who nurtured them intellectually as well as materially. The poets of this period wrote panegyrics in honour of their patrons or to celebrate special occasions, and took part in literary sessions. They did not, however, act as *ustâds* to their patrons. And they were lavishly rewarded.<sup>16</sup>

In contrast to these early Mughals, several of the Mughal kings of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries were poets themselves. Shah Alam II (r. 1759–1806) and Bahadur Shah II (r. 1837–57) wrote poetry and chose certain poets to be their *ustâds*. But they did not institute a distinct position or title for that purpose, nor do they seem to have given anyone the title of poet-laureate. Zauq, the *ustâd* of Bahadur Shah, was not called *Malik-al-Su'arâ*. He was, however, given a new title *Kâqânî-i-Hind* (The Khaqani of India), which simply recognized his prowess as a writer of panegyrics.<sup>17</sup> In fact, the right to give the title *Malik-al-Su'arâ* seems to have been taken upon themselves by some of the

<sup>15</sup> Shibli Nu'mani, *Si'r-al-'Ajam* (Azamgarh, 1956 reprint), vol. III, p. 188.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid. passim. Also, Aziz Ahmad, 'Safawid Poets and India,' in *Iran*, XIV, 1976, pp. 117–32.

<sup>17</sup> Tanvir Ahmad Alavi, *Zauq: Savânih aur Intiqâd* (Lahore, 1963), pp. 65–9. I find no reason to accept Alavi's contention that this title was equivalent to the title *Malik-al-Su'arâ*.

eighteenth-century Urdu poets—Mirza Muhammad Rafi' Sauda, for example, is mentioned as *Malik-al-Ṣu'arâ* by two of his eighteenth-century contemporaries, even though there is no evidence that Sauda was given that title by any of the Mughal kings.<sup>18</sup> This, of course, is indicative of the sad state Mughal sovereignty had fallen into by that time. On the other hand, a few years later when the self-proclaimed King of Avadh, Ghazi-al-Din Haidar, wanted to bestow on Imam Bakhsh Nasikh the title of *Malik-al-Ṣu'arâ*, the latter refused, saying that either the Mughal king should give that title or the British Government.<sup>19</sup> In any case, the hundred years preceding 1857 were also the years during which Urdu poetry flourished tremendously in North India, and fine Urdu poets such as Mir and Ghalib were able to find reasonable, though not extravagant, patronage during most of their lives. It is to their experiences that we now turn.

Mir (b. 1723), in his autobiography *Zikr-i-Mir*,<sup>20</sup> describes his father, Muhammad Ali, to have been a dervish of some renown in Agra, though no other evidence has yet confirmed that claim. Muhammad Ali married twice and at one time had a number of servants; but Mir also mentions occasions when life was much harder. We can safely assume that as a dervish, Muhammad Ali had a number of disciples who took care of his and his family's needs—an act of piety but a kind of patronage nevertheless.

After his father's death, Mir—only eleven years old—went to Delhi to gain access to Samsam-al-Daula, the most prominent of his father's acquaintances, and with the help of an intermediary succeeded in obtaining a modest monthly allow-

<sup>18</sup> Khaliq Anjum, *Mirzâ Muhammad Rafi' Saudâ* (Aligarh, 1966), pp. 86–90.

<sup>19</sup> Muhammad Husain Azad, *Âb-i-Hayât* (Lahore, 1917 reprint), pp. 352–3.

<sup>20</sup> Muhammad Taqi Mir, *Zikr-i Mir*, ed. Abdul Haq (Aurangabad, 1928). English translation: C. M. Naim, *Zikr-i Mir: The Autobiography of the Eighteenth Century Mughal Poet: Mir Muhammad Taqi 'Mir'* (New Delhi, 1999). All references below are to the English version.

ance. Being a Syed and the son of a dervish, Mir expected this kind of patronage. When that patron died and the income stopped, Mir again went to Delhi, where he received some education and also some encouragement in writing poetry. He began to attend musha'irahs. Soon his verse gained recognition—it also gained him his first patron Ri'ayat Khan, a minor noble, who made Mir his companion (*rafiq*). There is no evidence that Mir wrote panegyrics in the Khan's praise or corrected his verses. Mir's job must have been to entertain the Khan with his conversation and poetry, and on occasion be his confidant. But soon a disagreement occurred. One moonlit night, the Khan was seated on his terrace, listening to a young male singer, when Mir arrived. The Khan asked Mir if he would teach the singer some of his verses so that the latter could sing them for his pleasure. Mir writes: 'I replied, "I cannot possibly do that." He said, "Please, for my sake." Since I was dependent upon him I had to obey, and I taught the boy five. . . verses. But it sat heavy on my delicate nature and, after a few days, I took to staying at home. The Khan sent kind messages but I didn't go, and gave up my position [in his household].'<sup>21</sup> Mir left his patron because he felt he had been insulted—the insult lay in being made to treat as an equal someone whom Mir considered much lower to him in social status. It is clear that though the poet was willing to serve a patron there were rules for both the parties to observe.

In the next few years Mir had three different patrons, the last of whom was Raja Jugal Kishore, a minor dignitary, who asked Mir to be his *ustâd*. Mir writes, 'I didn't find [his verses] worthy of correction and scratched a line across most of them.'<sup>22</sup> But Raja Jugal Kishore eventually introduced Mir to

<sup>21</sup> Naim, *Zikr*, p. 72. Ghalib, who is discussed below, was fond of music and in one of his letters mentions that he once taught a ghazal of his to a singer. See *Bâg-i-Do-Dar*, ed. Vazirul Hasan Abidi (Lahore, 1968, 2nd edition), p. 225 of the Notes. Ghalib, of course, did of his own volition and not at some patron's behest.

<sup>22</sup> Naim, *Zikr*, p. 76.

a more powerful man, Raja Nagar Mal, the Deputy Minister, who made Mir his companion and confidant.

Mir stayed in the service of Raja Nagar Mal for fourteen years. Unlike Raja Jugal Kishore, Raja Nagar Mal was only a lover of poetry and not a poet himself. Mir did not have to correct verses, nor did he have to write panegyrics. The poet and the patron were loyal to each other through good days and bad until an occasion arose when Mir again felt slighted. While encamped away from Delhi, the Raja sent Mir to make a political deal which he successfully concluded. The Raja, however, then changed his mind and did the opposite. Mir accompanied him back to Delhi, but once there parted company. After some time, Mir writes, 'I went around like a beggar to the door of every chief in the royal army. Because I was well-known for my poetry, they treated me kindly enough, and I could survive for a while living like a dog or a cat.'<sup>23</sup> The next seven or eight years were very hard for Mir. He lived off the small kindnesses extended to him by a number of people, including the King, Shah Alam II, who himself survived at the mercy of others. Mir writes, 'The [king] often sent for me, but I did not go. . . .[He, however,] sent me something once in a while.'<sup>24</sup> Here Mir is not telling the whole truth. There is in his collection a panegyric in praise of the King. He must have presented it in the court but was probably disappointed in the reward.

By the end of 1781, Mir was desperate to leave Delhi. He was close to sixty and his reputation as a poet was not only firmly established in Delhi but had also spread to all centres of Urdu culture in North India. Mir made overtures to Nawab Asaf-al-Daula, the ruler of Lucknow at the time, by sending him a panegyric through an intermediary—probably Salar Jang, who was acquainted with Mir through Mir's step-uncle. According to Mir, Salar Jang obtained from the Nawab some travel-money for Mir and sent him a letter, pressing upon him

<sup>23</sup> Ibid. p. 107.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid. p. 116.

to come. Mir lost no time in reaching Lucknow, where he initially stayed with Salar Jang. Mir writes:

After four or five days, it so happened that the Navab came to the mansion [of Salar Jang] to enjoy a round of cock fights. I was present there and paid my respects. He intuitively recognised me and said, 'You must be Mir Muhammad Taqi.' He then embraced me with utmost kindness, and took me with him to where he was to sit and, addressing me, recited some of his own verses. I said, 'Praise be to God. "A king's verse is the king of verses."' Out of extreme kindness, he then pressed me to recite some verses too. That day I [merely] recited some couplets of a ghazal. At the time of the Navab's departure, Salar Jang said to him, 'Now that Mir has come here at your Excellency's command, you are his master. You may assign him a position and send for him to keep you company whenever you wish.' The Nawab replied, 'I shall fix a salary and let you know.' After a couple of days, he sent for me. I went and presented myself and read the panegyric I had written in his praise. He listened to it and, with utmost graciousness, accepted me into his service.<sup>25</sup>

The Nawab who was himself a poet, though of little talent, treated Mir decently enough; he gave him a salary which was, according to some, two hundred rupees per month, and according to others, three hundred. But it is doubtful if Mir ever received that salary in full—no one did in those days. There were other disappointments. Mir has written three long poems describing the hunting trips of the Nawab. Near the end of the third, Mir claims to have done for Asaf-al-Daula's future renown what great Persian poets had done for their royal patrons, but the end of the poem also contains two couplets which Mir seems to have added later: 'Though I displayed many jewels // No buyer came forward. // Let's now save our wealth of talent; // Enough of Lucknow, let's go back.'<sup>26</sup>

<sup>25</sup> Ibid. pp. 118–19.

<sup>26</sup> Muhammad Taqi Mir, *Kulliyât-i-Mir* (Kanpur, 1916, 5th reprint), p. 563. The two couplets come after a couplet containing the poet's name—'You

There could have been some conflicts of protocol too. Mir's autobiography mentions events up to March 1789 and there is some internal evidence to suggest that by that time Mir had again taken to a life of seclusion and relative poverty. For the story of his later years we must go to another source, the literary chronicle *Āb-i-Hayât* of Muhammad Husain Azad (first published in 1880) which contains anecdotal material that Azad had heard or read about Mir. This is how Azad tells the story of Mir's break with Nawab Asaf-al-Daula:

One day the Nawab sent for him. When Mir arrived he found the Nawab beside an ornamental pool, with a cane in his hand. There were multicoloured fish in the pool and the Nawab was watching them swim around. The Nawab expressed delight at seeing Mir and requested him to read some ghazal. Mir began, but the Nawab continued to play with the fish with his cane. Mir was annoyed and stopped. The Nawab said, 'Please go on, Mir Sahib.' This happened several times. Finally Mir stopped and said, 'How can I go on? I would read if you pay attention, but you are playing with the fish.' The Nawab said, 'A good couplet will itself catch my attention.' Mir found that remark most displeasing; he put the ghazal back in his pocket and returned home. After that day he stopped going to the palace altogether. Some days later, Mir was walking through the market when the Nawab's procession appeared. When the Nawab saw Mir, he said with much affection, 'Mir Sahib, you have abandoned us completely. You never pay us a visit.' Mir replied, 'This is no place to talk. Gentlemen don't stand around talking in the street.' And he never went to visit the Nawab again, preferring to live in poverty.<sup>27</sup>

According to Azad, the next Nawab, Sa'adat 'Ali Khan, eventually extended to Mir some patronage, and there is also some other evidence to suggest that Mir did not die in abject

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have said a lot, Mir, now be quiet, // For God is sufficient, the rest is lust'—which must have been the original ending, the *maqta'* verse.

<sup>27</sup> Azad, *Āb-i-Hayât*, pp. 206–7.

poverty in 1810. By that time the British presence in Lucknow was quite strong, and some of the officers of the East India Company were interested in Urdu poetry. But the chief centre of British interest in Urdu was Calcutta where a number of Urdu writers had been hired to prepare books at the College of Fort William. It is reported that when these writers were being hired Mir's name was also considered by the British Resident in Lucknow but then turned down on account of Mir's advanced age. This made the wits of Lucknow to remark that the 'Sahibs' of Calcutta needed porters, not poets.<sup>28</sup>

Ghalib (b. 1797), on the other hand, owed a great deal to the presence of the British in India.<sup>29</sup> He has written, '... I, the motion of whose pen spills pearls upon the page, have from my childhood eaten the salt of the English government.'<sup>30</sup> He was born in a Central Asian family of mercenary soldiers—his father died in the service of the Raja of Alwar and his uncle helped the British against the Marathas to gain control of the fort of Agra. Indeed, for much of his life, Ghalib received a share of the pension that the British gave his uncle for that collaboration.

Ghalib grew up in Agra and had a fair amount of education at home, but he was not formally trained for any profession. And yet in an irreversible way for Ghalib, to paraphrase his words, Time had changed the lances of his ancestors into reeds for pens. Ghalib moved to Delhi after his marriage in 1810 and lived like a young man about town. He began to write poetry in Urdu and had a collection ready by the time he was nineteen. He then turned his attention to Persian and wrote

<sup>28</sup> Mirza 'Ali Lutf, *Tazkira-i-Gulshan-i-Hind* (1801), ed. Ata Kakvi (Patna, 1972), pp. 77–8.

<sup>29</sup> The bibliography on Ghalib is extensive. Two best sources in English for biographical information are: Ralph Russell and Khurshidul Islam, *Ghalib: Life and Letters* (London, 1969) and Ralph Russell, (Ed.), *Ghalib: The Poet and His Age* (London, 1972).

<sup>30</sup> Ghalib, 'Dastanbū,' in *Urdū-i-Mu'allā* (Ghalib Number, part 2, February 1961), edited by Khwaja Ahmad Faruqi, p. 131.

almost exclusively in that language for the next thirty years. During this time Ghalib had no patron, even though he made a number of futile efforts to acquire one. He sent a panegyric to Nasiruddin Haidar, the ruler of Lucknow, but received not a penny from the award that is said to have been granted. Earlier, on his way to Calcutta he had stopped in Lucknow and was to meet the powerful minister, Agha Mir, but the meeting could not take place. Ghalib had prepared a prose piece in Persian for presentation in which he had exclusively used words with only the undotted letters, but, as he wrote to a friend, 'because the other party expressed unwillingness to embrace me as an equal at the time of our first meeting, that idea did not take on a concrete shape.'<sup>31</sup> He was considered for a teaching position at the famous Delhi College but a similar question of protocol arose and Ghalib renounced the offer. He also tried to gain a position at the Mughal court but had no success for quite a few years. Akbar Shah II did not patronize him, while Akbar Shah's heir-apparent chose another poet, Zauq, for his *ustâd*.

Finally in 1850, through the efforts of the minister of the new king as well as of the king's spiritual mentor, Ghalib gained recognition from the Mughal court. Bahadur Shah II, Zafar, bestowed on him robes of honour and three quite high-sounding titles—*Najm-al-Daula*, *Dabîr-al-Mulk*, *Nizâm Jang*—and asked him to write a history of the Mughal dynasty at an annual stipend of Rs 600. To be exact, Ghalib's assignment was merely to rewrite in ornate Persian prose what the King's minister culled for him from earlier chronicles. In 1854, Ghalib was chosen by the heir-apparent to be his *ustâd* at a salary of Rs 400 per annum. The same year, after Zauq passed away, Ghalib also became the King's *ustâd*, but with no addition to his salary. He also began to receive Rs 500 per annum from Wajid Ali Shah, the ruler of Lucknow, as a reward for the panegyrics he had written in his honour. Here we may

<sup>31</sup> S. A. I. Tirmizi (Ed.), *Persian Letters of Ghalib* (New Delhi: Ghalib Academy, 1969), p. 13.



usefully look at some incidents that throw light on Ghalib's relations with these royal patrons.

In 1851, Ghalib was asked by the King's favourite wife to write a poem on the occasion of her youngest son's marriage. He complied, ending the poem with a harmless boast:

*I say as one who knows poetry's worth, and not as Ghalib's partisan,*

*Let's see who thinks that he can write a better prothalamion.*

The King, however, took it amiss and asked his *ustâd* to write a similar poem, paying special attention to the last verse. Zauq promptly wrote one, ending it with the following couplet:

*Take this poem and read it to him who claims to be a poet,*

*For this is how a prothalamion is written by a master poet.*

When Ghalib realized what had happened, he wrote a poem in apology, which nevertheless contained such verses:

*I wish only to present the facts of the case;*

*I have no wish to serve my vanity.*

*My ancestors were all professional soldiers,*

*My honour resides not merely in my poetry.<sup>32</sup>*

The implied barbs in these and other verses were either lost on the King or he chose to accept their surface humility. Ghalib not only retained his own job, but on Zauq's death gained his too.

The King and Ghalib did not, however, care much for each other. Ghalib prided himself on his Persian poetry and wrote more Persian verse in praise of the King than Urdu, while the King was fond of Urdu poetry and, in it, of a different style

<sup>32</sup> For more on this and other literary rivalries for patronage and fame, see Muhammad Yaqub Amir, *Urdû ke Adabî Ma'rake* (New Delhi, 1982).

from Ghalib's. Ghalib corrected Zafar's verses but only half-heartedly, and the most praise he in his turn got from Zafar was not for his verse but for his recitation.<sup>33</sup> But they had to be together, for Ghalib was the best poet of his age and Bahadur Shah was the King, even if only in name. Ghalib's position at the Mughal court required him to attend on the King at fixed hours almost every day. These provided occasions for witty remarks and impromptu verses to regale his master. He was also required to present commemorative verses at such auspicious occasions as the King's birthday or the two Eids. There was a catch to this requirement: if Ghalib ever failed to come up with appropriate verses he was obliged to greet the king with a small monetary gift (*nazr*). Ghalib often tried to save his money and energy by writing only a short poem, sometimes even just a couple of verses and was, at least on one occasion, reprimanded by the King's minister for doing so.<sup>34</sup>

On another occasion, when a rumour spread from Lucknow to Delhi that Bahadur Shah had become a Shi'ah, Ghalib was asked by the King to write a poem to counter the charge. Ghalib, though a Shi'ah himself, had to obey the royal command and wrote a short poem in Persian, making the King its narrator. Later, Ghalib's biographer writes, he explained his action to the leading Shi'ah divine of Lucknow in this fashion: 'I am in the King's employ and carry out whatever order he gives me. You may attribute the contents of the poem to the King and [the King's minister] and the words to me.'<sup>35</sup>

Similarly perfunctory was Ghalib's attitude towards the task of writing panegyrics, a task that he knew he had to perform as a patronized poet. This can be seen in a telling incident concerning the deposed King of Avadh, Wajid Ali Shah.

<sup>33</sup> Altaf Husain Hali, *Yâdgâr-i-Ghalib*, Urdu Section, ed. Malik Ram (New Delhi, 1971), p. 102.

<sup>34</sup> Ghalib's own remarks quoted in *Qasâ'id-o-Masnaviyât-i-Fârsî*, ed. Ghulam Rasul Mihr (Lahore, 1969), p. 60 of the *Masnaviyât* section.

<sup>35</sup> Hali, *Yâdgâr*, p. 89.

Ghalib describes it thus in another letter: 'I could not manage a new ode to the Refuge of the World [Wajid Ali Shah]. This one [i.e., the one I have already sent] was never presented; so I have put Wajid Ali Shah in Amjad Ali Shah's place. After all, God himself did the same. Anvari repeatedly did this, altering an ode in one man's praise for presentation to another. So if I alter the father's ode to suit the son, that's nothing so terrible, . . . And I wrote the poem not to show my prowess in poetry, but to beg.'<sup>36</sup>

But the events of 1857 put an end to these ties. Ghalib was now left with only one regular patron, the Nawab of Rampur, who had made Ghalib his *ustâd* that very year. The Nawab and his successor treated Ghalib with respect and supported him fairly well till the end of his life. Ghalib's attempts, both before 1857 and after, to gain patronage from other Indian chiefs, however, met with little or no response.

Both Mir and Ghalib came from families that took pride in their ancestry, and they received as well as expected respect from their Indian patrons on that account. And if ever an occasion arose when they felt some threat to their self-image, they were quick to react. They had some education at home and once they discovered in themselves a talent for poetry they cultivated it assiduously, in the case of Mir briefly with an *ustâd*, in Ghalib's case entirely on his own. We don't know if they prepared themselves for the profession of poetry quite the way Nizami 'Arusi suggests, by committing to memory '20,000 couplets of the poetry of the Ancients and 10,000 verses of the works of the Moderns,'<sup>37</sup> but there is no doubt that for them being a poet was an acknowledged occupation. They were willing to serve their masters and perform the duties that were traditionally expected of them. They provided companionship, served as confidants, wrote commemorative verses, acted as poetic mentors or *ustâd*, even composed verses in the name of the patron and defended his reputation

<sup>36</sup> Russell and Islam, *Ghalib: Life and Letters*, p. 222.

<sup>37</sup> *Ḥahâr Maqâla*, pp. 49-50.

through their writings. The patron in each instance was not some corporate body, but an individual who found pleasure and pride in the poet's company and verse and in having him identified with his own court rather than some rival's. There were many shared traditions between these poets and their patrons, including many implied or overt obligations to each other. Honour begat honour, loyalty received loyalty. Just as the patron assured the physical well-being of the poet, so did the poet contribute to the perceived sense of success and prosperity of the patron; one specific human being interacted with another, no matter how perfunctorily.

All of this changed gradually but quite profoundly as the British took over positions of power and patronage in India. There were no doubt individuals in the employ of the East India Company who enjoyed Persian and Urdu poetry and even wrote some themselves, but they did not exactly need all the services that the poets offered. Also, it was the corporate good, the Company's or the Crown's, that dictated the terms of their relationship with the Indians. They did not accept many of the cherished values of the latter. Muhammad Husain Azad has an interesting story about Mir in this regard. 'When the Governor-General or some other high-ranking Englishman would visit Lucknow, they would—either on their own or at the instance of their Munshi—invite Mir for a visit. But Mir would always avoid them. He would say, "People meet me either because of my Syed ancestry or on account of my poetry. The Sahibs don't care for ancestry, and they don't understand my poetry either. They would only give some reward. What would I gain from meeting them except humiliation!"'<sup>38</sup> Mir's remarks may sound unkind in light of the fact that the first ever edition—and a magnificent one at that—of Mir's collected Urdu verse was published by the College of Fort William at Calcutta in 1811, a few months after his death. But the larger truth behind the remarks remains valid if we remind ourselves that the purpose of that publication was not to

<sup>38</sup> Azad, *Āb-i-Hayāt*, p. 221.

honour the poet but to provide suitable teaching material at the College.

Ghalib proudly called himself a *namak-kvâr* of the English Government—he ate the salt of the English and was loyal to it. But, in Peter Hardy's elegant remark, 'this salt that he ate neither choked him nor made palatable anything and everything English.'<sup>39</sup> Ghalib regarded himself a member of the 'natural aristocracy of the Hindustan' as much as he thought of himself as a poet. In both capacities he expected suitable patronage, though perhaps not from the same people. He received a share of his uncle's pension from the English and spent a great deal of time and effort all through his life, first to enhance that pension then, after 1857, to have it reinstated. While doing so he came into contact with many officers of the East India Company in Delhi as well as in Calcutta, where he spent nearly two years pursuing his cause. He wrote panegyrics in praise of a great many Englishmen whom he desired to support his case. He also presented commemorative poems to assorted English dignitaries who visited Delhi as well as to most of Governors-General and Viceroy between 1836 and 1869.<sup>40</sup> This was as he felt it should be: they were the 'overlords' and he was their *namak-kvâr*. If he wrote many poems on occasions of Eid for his Mughal patron, he also wrote a Christmas panegyric in December 1837 for Lord Auckland. Though he received no recognition from the English as a poet, he served them with the only talent he possessed, adopting all the traditional postures of humility

<sup>39</sup> Peter Hardy, 'Ghalib and the British,' in *Ghalib: The Poet and His Age*, p. 63.

<sup>40</sup> *Qasâ'id-o-Masnaviyât-i-Fârsî* contains nineteen such panegyrics (*qasâ'id*) in Persian, to which we can add nearly a dozen shorter poems in Persian and Urdu in a similar vein. Though usually somewhat vehement in denouncing an opponent, Ghalib was quite circumspect in the only verses, just three in number, that he wrote criticizing an Englishman (Francis Hawkins, Resident at Delhi), who in effect ruined Ghalib's case for pension. See Ghalib, *Qit'ât*, *Rubâ'iyât*, *Tarkib-band*, *Tarjî'-band*, *Muḳammas*, ed. Ghulam Rasul Mihr (Lahore, 1969), p. 19.

required of him in his verse. But in 1842, when he was considered by the English for a job at Delhi College, he was equally insistent on what he thought was socially his due. There was a vacancy for a teacher of Persian and Mr Thomason, Secretary, Government of India—who, incidentally, knew Ghalib well—was to interview some of the learned men of Delhi. Ghalib was the first to be called and he arrived at the Secretary's camp in his palanquin. 'Mr Thomason was informed, and at once sent for him. But Ghalib got out of the palanquin and stood there waiting for the Secretary to come out and extend him the customary welcome. When some considerable time had passed and Mr Thomason had found out why Ghalib did not appear, he came out personally and explained that a formal welcome was appropriate when he attended the Governor's durbar, but not in the present case, when he came as a candidate for employment. Ghalib replied, "I contemplated taking a government appointment in the expectation that this would bring me greater honours than I now receive, not a reduction in those already accorded me." The Secretary replied, "I am bound by regulations." "Then I hope that you will excuse me," Ghalib said, and came away.'<sup>41</sup>

Ghalib was not aware of it but there had also occurred a sea change in the literary taste of India's rulers. Whereas Bahadur Shah had commissioned Ghalib in 1850 to rewrite in ornate Persian pieces of historical narrative culled from previous chronicles, the English had hired in 1800 middling writers at the College of Fort William to rewrite in simplest Urdu many of the popular Persian books.

Ghalib did not seek from the English any recognition as a poet until quite late in life. His first panegyric in honour of Queen Victoria written in 1855 was towards that end though it contained no such overt request. But in *Dastanbû*, his book on the events of 1857—written during the revolt—and in the panegyric of 1860 addressed to Lord Canning he did make explicit requests for recognition as a poet of the first rank. 'The

<sup>41</sup> Russell & Islam, *Ghalib: Life and Letters*, p. 63.

Kings of Byzantine and Iran,' he wrote, 'rewarded their poets and praise-singers in all sorts of ways. They filled their mouths with pearls or weighed them in gold or granted them villages or lavished treasures on them. This poet and praise-singer desires that the Queen bestow upon him a title, a robe of honour and a pension.'<sup>42</sup> Nothing suggests that his request was granted or even taken seriously, though Ghalib made doubly sure that he was understood by providing the more common synonyms for the obscure ancient Persian words. There is a great deal of irony here, for Ghalib futilely presented to the English what he greatly prided himself on, his virtuosity as a writer in Persian—he wrote panegyrics in elegant Persian and in his book on 1857, written expressly for the English, he elaborately avoided Arabic and used only the purest Persian. While all the time he had been creating a marvellous Urdu prose in his letters which was just the thing English authorities desired but remained unaware of until long after his death. The first collection of these letters appeared in October 1868; Ghalib died on 15 February 1869.

Two months before the publication of Ghalib's Urdu letters, an announcement appeared in the Allahabad Government Gazette: Notification No. 791A, dated 20 August 1868.<sup>43</sup> Its first paragraph read as follows: 'It is hereby announced that, with the view of encouraging authorship in the language of the North-Western Provinces, the Hon'able the Lieutenant-Governor is pleased to make it known that rewards will be given for the production of *useful* works in the vernacular, of approved design and style, in any branch of science or literature.'<sup>44</sup> (Emphasis added ) The maximum reward promised

<sup>42</sup> *Dastanbū*, p. 150.

<sup>43</sup> See my article, 'Prize-Winning *Adab*: A Study of Five Urdu Books Written in Response to the Allahabad Government Gazette Notification,' in *Moral Conduct and Authority: The Place of Adab in South Asian Islam*, ed. Barbara D. Metcalf (Berkeley, 1984), pp. 290–314. (Also included in this book.)

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.* pp. 292–3.

was one thousand rupees, and the Lieutenant-Governor, Sir William Muir, was 'prepared to give at least five such prizes in the coming year.'

It is highly improbable that Ghalib saw or heard of that notice. But even if he had it is doubtful that he could have seen his book of letters as a possible candidate for the promised reward. After all, the operative word in the notice was 'useful.' 'What is *useful* literature?' Ghalib would have rejoined, Or rather, 'What literature is not useful?' And if perchance he had seen the notice and submitted his book for consideration, his flippant remarks about marriage and love affairs would certainly have disqualified it, for 'treatises containing anything obnoxious to morality' were definitely not to be received. In all likelihood, Ghalib would also have been nonplussed, though perhaps not offended, by another special desideratum mentioned in that notice: 'Books suitable for the women of India will be especially acceptable, and well rewarded.' 'Special books for women?' he might have indulgently asked. 'What will the Sahibs dream up next?'

That brief notification, however, made explicit the literary values of the new rulers: a literature was worthy of patronage if it offered social good as opposed to individual gratification. It also suggested other new ways to classify literature: moral, immoral, adult, juvenile, women's. The effect of this notice on the development of modern Urdu literature in general, and of prose fiction in particular, was momentous. It set into motion the prolific pen of Nazir Ahmad whose novels became models for a long list of didactic works. Further, these novels, by being made required reading for all subsequent generations of Urdu-speaking school children also had other far-reaching effects which cannot be gone into here.<sup>45</sup> The new patrons not only were in a position to approve certain ideas through rewards and disapprove others through neglect, but they also had the extraordinary power to disseminate the approved ideas through an educational system of their own devising

<sup>45</sup> See my article listed in note 43 above.



which gradually became the primary source for economic gain and social status.

Though the Gazette Notification contained the statement that a work 'may be composed either in prose or verse,' there seems to be no record of any book of poems being chosen for reward. Poetry (Persian and Urdu), traditionally the more highly regarded form for works of imagination and also the source for pleasure and wisdom par excellence, was no doubt seen by the new patrons as being too closely tied to its pre-modern heritage. It couldn't possibly be of much relevance to their announced goals. And yet they also believed that 'poetry has great educative value.' This dilemma was resolved just a few years later in May 1874 in Lahore, where a special meeting, well attended by English officials and Indian gentry, was organized by the Directorate of Public Instruction. The first speaker was Muhammad Husain Azad, whose book *Âb-i-Hayât* was mentioned earlier.<sup>46</sup>

Muhammad Husain Azad (b. 1830) was the son of Maulavi Muhammad Baqir, an educated and liberal person who, among other things, taught for a while at Delhi College and also founded the first Urdu newspaper in Delhi in 1836. Maulavi Muhammad Baqir was also a close friend of the poet Zauq, whom Azad always regarded as his mentor of *ustâd*. After finishing his education at Delhi College, Azad worked on his father's newspaper until the execution of his father by the English in the aftermath of the Mutiny. Azad then fled from Delhi to Lucknow and eventually made his way to Punjab where, after an assortment of jobs, he found employment in the office of the Director of Public Instruction in Lahore. Slowly his learning and talents were recognized and at the time of that special public meeting in 1874, Azad was the Assistant Professor of Arabic at the Government College.

<sup>46</sup> The information on Azad is primarily from two sources: Muhammad Sadiq, *Muhammad Husain Azad: His Life and Works* (Lahore, 1965), and Aslam Farrukhi, *Muhammad Husain Âzâd: Hayât aur Tasârif* (Karachi, 1965).

Azad, who had even earlier expressed some dissatisfaction with the popular taste in Urdu poetry, used this occasion to make an appeal to his compatriots: 'I do not say that your poetry is bereft of ornament and beauty. No, it received in heritage magnificent robes and precious jewels from its elders. But now what can it do if Time has made those robes look tawdry and those jewels out of fashion? Your elders could always invent new topics and styles for poetry—as you can too. Yet the sad fact is that new robes and new jewels which are suitable for today lie sealed in English boxes beside us but we remain unaware of them. The key to those boxes is with those of our compatriots who know English. I now turn to them and say, "You who are rich with English, you see the terrible state of your country's poetry and yet show no concern. . . . Why don't you make use of the treasure you possess to decorate this relic of your ancestors and enable it to find favour again in some court."'<sup>47</sup> At the conclusion of his remarks, Azad—being quite a dynamic person—read a short poem on 'Night' as an example of what he hoped for.

Then came the turn of Col. W. R. M. Holroyd, Director of Public Instruction, Punjab. 'This meeting has been called,' he said, 'to discover means for the development of Urdu poetry which is in a state of decadence today. For this purpose it is requested that the gentry, intelligentsia, and those interested in poetry and other forms of literature should devote their attention to it. . . .'<sup>48</sup> He then read from a letter received from the Secretary, Punjab Government: 'His Honour, the Lieutenant-Governor is pleased to suggest another thing of which the Committee [on text books] has made no mention, and which, in the opinion of His Honour, is well worth the attention of the officers of the Education Department. . . . The Urdu text-books in use at present, or those recommended by the Committee, do not include any poetry. It goes without saying that poetry has great educative value. . . . Keeping this in view, I

<sup>47</sup> Farrukhi, *Muhammad Husain*, p. 234.

<sup>48</sup> Sadiq, *Muhammad Husain*, pp. 31–2.

have been directed to inquire if it is not possible to include in the curriculum of our secondary and high schools a selection from Urdu poetry *aiming at moral instruction and presenting a natural picture of our feelings and thoughts*. . . . If . . . with the help of Government schools, indigenous poetry of a non-sectarian character were written to gradually replace the poetry in vogue today, it would really be an important step forward.<sup>49</sup>

Then the Director, continuing his speech, proposed to his distinguished audience that they should 'lay the foundation of a new *musha'ara* with the peculiarity that instead of a hemistich, they should propose a certain subject on which the poets should write poems to be read in the general meetings. . . . Should this proposal succeed, the year 1874 would be a landmark in the history of India, and people would remember the poets through whose efforts poetry rose out of decadence and reached the height of perfection. I propose that we should hold monthly meetings, and that for the next month the poets should write in praise of the rainy season.'<sup>50</sup>

The good Colonel later had copies of Azad's speech and poem distributed throughout the country using the resources of the Education Department. He also declared prizes for best poems. Thus began the age of new poetry in Urdu with poems being written on such topics as The Rainy Season, Winter, Hope, Patriotism, Peace, and Justice. These meetings were fairly regularly held for nearly a year and some poets were given modest rewards. Then the interest of the Education Department faded away. One finds no further record of any patronage of Urdu poets by the English until the time of the Second World War, when many were hired by the Publicity Department. But that is another story.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid. Emphasis added.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid.

The new trend in favour of such earnest, somewhat didactic poetry, however, prevailed.<sup>51</sup> It won favour from Sir Syed Ahmad Khan, who wrote an article in support of Azad, and also gained a major convert in Altaf Husain Hali, who was employed in the textbooks office at Lahore and who took part in some of the early meetings. Just as Nazir Ahmad in one of his prize-winning novels had much of the existing Urdu literature—deemed immoral and decadent—consigned to flames, so did Hali declare it all to be ‘worse in stench than a latrine’ in his major poem, ‘The Tide and Ebb of Islam,’ published in 1879.<sup>52</sup> Hali also went on to write the first book of literary criticism in Urdu in which he evaluated all of Urdu poetry and found it wanting in useful, moral, truthful, realistic and sincere expression and thought.<sup>53</sup> The educational institutions sponsored, encouraged and regulated by the new rulers of India inculcated these ideas and attitudes into the minds of several generations of Urdu-speaking children. Many years had to pass before it again became possible to consider Urdu’s classical heritage in its true literary character. Such was the effect of a patronage which on the one hand claimed to seek public good, as opposed to private satisfaction, and on the other had powerful means to disseminate its preferences on a scale that not even a Grand Mughal could have indulged in.

<sup>51</sup> See Frances W. Pritchett, *Nets of Awareness: Urdu Poetry and Its Critics* (Berkeley, 1994), for an insightful and detailed discussion of these developments.

<sup>52</sup> See Christopher Shackle and Javed Majeed, *Hali's Musaddas: The Flow and Ebb of Islam* (New Delhi, 1997), for a full translation of the poem and a valuable analysis.

<sup>53</sup> See Laurel Steele, ‘Hali and His *Muqaddamah*: The Creation of a Literary Attitude in Nineteenth Century India,’ in *Annual of Urdu Studies*, 1:1981, pp. 1–45.

# The Consequences of Indo-Pakistani War for Urdu Language and Literature: A Parting of the Ways?\*

In September 1965, there occurred between the armies of India and Pakistan a fierce clash which each side attributed to the aggressive designs of the other. This undeclared war lasted only a short time; first a ceasefire ordered by the United Nations, and later the pact signed at Tashkent, brought the hostilities to a formal close. It was by no means a spontaneous or unexpected flare-up, the hatred and antagonism that caused it had been festering for a long time. Similarly, its effects have not been short-lived; neither have they been restricted to the area of military logistics and high diplomacy. In this paper I intend to review the consequences of that conflict for Urdu language and literature. I shall proceed by showing why it was necessary for Urdu writers, especially the poets, to respond to this war, and what sort of attitudes were displayed in the poetry written exclusively in response to it. I shall then discuss certain subsequent developments in the general area of Urdu language and literature and end by presenting my own conclusions with regard to the future.

Urdu is spoken by millions in both India and Pakistan; thus during the conflict Urdu was used for official propaganda on both sides. In Pakistan for local propaganda alone, since they use Hindi for their official propaganda to the Indian audience.

\* Revised. Written in 1967; Originally appeared in *Journal of Asian Studies*, 38:2 (Feb. 1969), pp. 269–283.

More so in India, where it was used to reach out to the local Urdu population as well.<sup>1</sup> I was told in November 1965 that the number of Urdu programs on the All India Radio had increased greatly in the days following the conflict, and not all were directed to the listeners in Pakistan.<sup>2</sup>

After partition in 1947, a large number of Muslim Urdu writers, mostly of the younger generation, went to Pakistan from India, and a few Muslim and all non-Muslim Urdu writers of any repute came the other way. (The religious identification of the writers is only to make clear the non-linguistic nature of the migration.) Certainly after 1949 no major Muslim Urdu writer migrated from India to Pakistan, with the exceptions of Josh Malihabadi and Niyaz Fatehpuri, who did so for purely non-political reasons.<sup>3</sup>

When in September 1965, the ever present antagonism between India and Pakistan rose to the surface again, resulting in

<sup>1</sup> The importance of Urdu for the purposes of propaganda in India at the time can be gauged from the fact that in the elections of 1967, according to the *Anjuman-i-Taraqqî-i-Urdû*, the Indian National Congress put out more posters in Urdu than in either Hindi or English. The considerable circulation at the time of such virulently Hindu nationalist Urdu journals as the *Pratâp* and the *Milâp* is also indicative of Urdu's importance.

<sup>2</sup> None was made permanent, except minimally. In 2002, Pakistanis can daily listen to at least ten hours of 'Urdu Majlis,' broadcast specifically for their benefit by the All India Radio; the Urdu speakers in Lucknow get only thirty minutes of Urdu programming every day.

The importance of Urdu for propaganda purposes in India at the time was immense. According to a report from the *Anjuman-i-Taraqqî-i-Urdû*, Aligarh, in the elections of 1967 the Indian National Congress put out more posters in Urdu than in either Hindi or English. The considerable circulation at the time of such Hindu nationalist journals as the *Pratâp* and the *Milâp* is also evidence of Urdu's prevalence at the time.

<sup>3</sup> Of the two major Muslim writers, Sajjad Zaheer and Qurratulain Hyder, who returned to India after having originally immigrated to Pakistan, the latter's decision was entirely personal, though at the time it was hailed or denounced as political. Zaheer's return to India was a matter of political expediency, as was his original migration to Pakistan, where he was for a while General Secretary of the Communist Party.

a fierce war, Urdu writers in both countries responded to the occasion, with the poets as usual leading the way. In Urdu society, poetry is the most public form of literature. Musha'irahs, or public readings of poetry, are still extremely popular, just as the habit of quoting poetry in everyday speech is as strong as ever. For these reasons, and others, I have chosen to concentrate on the poets' response to the 1965 conflict as it was expressed publicly in musha'irahs, on the radio, and in the pages of newspapers and magazines. Much of this poetry has since become available to us in anthologies and, in the case of Pakistani material, through the special War Numbers of various literary magazines.<sup>4</sup> (A few examples of such poetry are given at the end of the essay.) What conclusions can one draw from a study of this material?

While vigorously denouncing the Pakistani action, Indian poets often ignore or gloss over the Kashmir issue. One does not find mentioned even once the name of Sheikh Abdullah, although only a short time earlier he was a hero in the eyes of the Indians and was especially admired by Urdu writers for his patronage of their language. In fact, with reference to Kashmir, the poets of both countries seem to adhere strictly to the official line, ignoring the full history of the issue.

<sup>4</sup> Books: (India) Ali Sirdar Ja'fari, *Pairâhan-i-Şarar* (Bombay, 1966); Naubahar Sabir, *Lahû-Tarang* (Patiala, 1966); Sahir Lakhnavi, *Şamsîr-o-Sinân* (Lucknow, 1965). (Pakistan) Tahir Shadani et al, *Gulbâng-i-Jihâd* (Lahore, 1965); Tahir Lahauri, *Pakistân Pâ'indabâd* (Lahore, 1966). Special Numbers: (Pakistan) *Naqş Jang Nambar* (Karachi, 1966); *Nuqûş*, Annual Number, III, War (Lahore, 1966); *Sâqî* (Karachi, January-February, April, September, 1966); *Barg-i-Gul, Mujâhid Nambar* (Karachi, 1966). None in India.

Also various issues of *Qaumî Âvâz* (Lucknow), *Imroz* (Lahore), *Mansûr* (Karachi), *Mâh-i-Nau* (Karachi), and *Nusrât* (Lahore). While in India (November 1965-May 1966), I had the occasion to attend several musha'irahs, and listen to Urdu literary programs on Pakistani and Indian radio stations.

Many Indian poets tend to differentiate between the masses of Pakistan and their rulers and suggest that the latter misled the masses into this war, allegedly either because of their own 'Fascist' motives or at the instigation of some outside power. This external coercer is variously identified as the 'Capitalist' West or as Communist China, depending upon the ideological bias of the poet.<sup>5</sup> No such ambivalence, however, is evident on the part of the Pakistani poets. Theirs is as unequivocal a position as there can be: Pakistan is in the right; it is not anyone's stooge; it is the victim of Indian aggression; and all Indians, rulers and masses alike, are denounced for this aggression.<sup>6</sup>

The Indian side emphasize the common heritage of Indian Hindus and Muslims, the so-called *Gangâ-Jamni* culture that developed in North India and Hyderabad. The Pakistani poets begin with two separate nations and completely ignore any common past. Needless to say, all the Pakistani poets involved are Muslims, while on the Indian side there are non-Muslims as well.

Indian poets invoke the spirit of patriotism and old nationalism and ask for sacrifices in the name of the motherland. They also refer to their peaceful heritage of ahimsâ, to the teachings of Buddha and Gandhi, although, of course, they add for good measure the names of such warriors as Maharana Pratap, Shivaji, Sirajuddaulah, and Bhagat Singh. The Pakistanis raise the slogan of *jihâd*, refer to what seems to be a newly discovered fiery past, and invoke the names of Muhammad bin Qasim, Mahmud Ghaznavi, Babar, and Nadir

<sup>5</sup> Ja'fari's poems, 'Du'â' and 'Dast-i-Faryâd,' in *Pairâhan-i-Sarar*, and the poems of Jagan Nath Azad; Nazish, Rif'at Sarosh, and Munawwar Lakhnavi in *Lahû-Tarang*. Munawwar, incidentally, suspects a collusion of Pakistan, Communist China, and Great Britain!

<sup>6</sup> Habib Jalib in *Gulbâng-i-Jihâd*, p. 95, and Farigh Bukhari in *Naqs*, p. 450, are the only Pakistani poets who incline to suspect the U.S.A. to have a hand in the matter.



Shah, all, incidentally, foreign invaders who first plundered what is now Pakistan.<sup>7</sup>

On both sides, the minor poets seem more rabid and belligerent than the major poets. However, while some major Indian poets are willing to strike a quasi-equivocal note, the major Pakistani poets are more absolutistic.

From a literary and aesthetic point of view, the Indian side produced fewer examples of good poetry. One notable exception was the poetry of Ali Sirdar Ja'fari, a veteran Progressive poet, who expressed a genuine commitment to peace and his grief at the ravages of war in several poignant and intensely lyrical ghazals and poems. On the Pakistani side, the older poets were generally disappointing (with the possible exceptions of Ahmad Nadim Qasimi and Mukhtar Siddiqui) but of the younger generations, Safdar Mir, Ada Ja'fari, Himayat Ali Sha'ir, Mustafa Zaidi, Majeed Amjad, Shafi Aqeel, and a few others produced some excellent poems in which one finds the intensity of their emotions well complemented by the quality of the verses.<sup>8</sup> If one compares the Indian Urdu poetry of

<sup>7</sup> Ironically, some Hindu poets, referring to Prophet Muhammad as the 'Messenger of Peace,' invoked his name in their appeals to the Muslims of Pakistan, while a few Pakistani writers, including some army officers, preferred to discover in him a master strategist of war. For example, Arsh Malsiyani, '*Taskîr-i-Amn*,' in *Samsîr-o-Sinân*, p. 25, cf. Maj. General Akbar Khan, '*Hadîs-i-Dil*,' in *Naqş*, p. 82.

<sup>8</sup> Of the few articles on the poetry of the 1965 conflict that appeared soon after the event, only one was noteworthy: Rafiq Khawar, '*Husn-i-Kalâm Â'ina: Razmiya Şâ'irî par ek Nazar*,' in *Barg-i Gul*, pp. 285-303. Khawar's comments deserve to be summarised here. He suggests that though the present rage for war poetry may be temporary, it has at least resolved the impasse [*jamûd*] faced by Pakistani Urdu writers. They no longer lack a topic to write about. They need not borrow inspiring ideas from elsewhere, there is one available at home. In fact, the poets have taken up the war thematic [*razmiya*] so avidly that the older tradition of lyrical [*bazmiya*] poetry seems to be threatened. Mir and Ghalib are no more their models; only Iqbal's voice is echoed in their poetry. Even the craft of poetry seems to be ignored by these poets in the heat of their emotions, but there is no

1965 with the poetry written during the Indian skirmish with Communist China in 1962, one is struck not so much by the absence or presence of certain names as by the similarity in the generally poor quality of the poetry.<sup>9</sup> It may be said that perhaps in both instances war was not a deeply felt experience for most of the Urdu poets of India.<sup>10</sup>

After the cessation of hostilities, however, there were certain interesting developments which may well foreshadow trends of the future.

Soon after the end of the war, questions were raised in Urdu literary circles about the role of the writer in national crises of such order. In India these discussions remained limited to the

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reason why after some time these emotions will not find expression in profounder ways. Punjabi was neglected before this conflict, Khawar adds, but now Punjabi songs are heard all over Pakistan, and the Punjabi poets have discovered a new vitality in their medium. Even Urdu writers may gain something from this revival of Punjabi.

<sup>9</sup> Ma'sum Sherghatavi, *Lalkâr* (Champan, 1963). Most of the 132 poets included in this anthology are not known outside of Bihar. There are, however, also included such well known poets as Ali Sirdar Ja'fari, Sahir Ludhyanavi, Majruh Sultanpuri, Jamil Mazhari, Ravish Siddiqui, Salam Macchlishahri and Saghar Nizami. Only a very few of the selections are poetically superb, such as the short ghazals of Majruh and Salam and the poems of I'jaz Siddiqui and Sirdar Ja'fari. Most others are merely intensely patriotic and tend to lose literary qualities in their vehement denunciation of the alleged Chinese treachery. On the whole, in these poems, one does not find the deeper personal involvement evident in the poems of some of the younger Pakistani poets. On the other hand, it must be pointed out that neither in India nor in Pakistan has any poet experienced war or responded to it in the manner of such English poets as Wilfred Owen, W. W. Gibson, and Siegfried Sassoon.

<sup>10</sup> To my limited knowledge, war has not been a deeply felt experience for any modern South Asian poet in any language. Perhaps the volunteer nature of the armies has kept poets away from it. Some blame must also go to the low rate of sufficient literacy in the lower ranks and also in the general population. South Asia has never experienced general conscription.

pages of literary magazines, but in Pakistan several public seminars were also held on this topic.<sup>11</sup>

In Pakistan, the opinion was nearly unanimous that writers had a definite role to play on such occasions. References were made in this connection to the Arabic tradition of *rajaz*,<sup>12</sup> but mainly it was the sense of recognition of a new national and social identity that inspired the writers to declare for an active defence of their country by means of their writings. In India, things appeared a little more equivocal; a few writers felt there was not much that they could do as writers. This was in sharp contrast to the statements of several younger poets of Pakistan whose only regret was that they were not able to do more during the brief period of the war.

A curious and revealing controversy developed in India. In October 1965, shortly after the war, Ali Sirdar Ja'fari published an article in one of the leading Hindi weeklies, *Dharmayug*, in which he sought to uphold the 'Progressivism' [*taraqqī-pasandī*] of two Pakistani poets, Faiz Ahmad Faiz and Josh Malihabadi.<sup>13</sup> He began by dividing Pakistani poets—without mentioning names—into three groups, the most significant in his mind being the one allegedly led by Faiz, and went on to explain to his Hindi readers—i.e. predominantly Hindu readers—how Faiz used the erotic symbolism of ghazal poetry for his message of revolution and

<sup>11</sup> 'Fankār aur Difā'-i-Vatan' (Artists and the Defense of the Motherland), in *Nusrat*, No. 7, New Series, March 1966. Report of a public symposium held in Lahore on December 9 and 10, 1965. Similar meetings were also held at Karachi and Rawalpindi.

<sup>12</sup> In ancient Arabia it was customary for the poets to travel with their tribes and recite or declaim hortatory verses at the time of battles. Individual warriors would also recite similar verses about their courage and skill while challenging the enemy. This practice as well as the particular metre used for such verses were called *rajaz*.

<sup>13</sup> Ali Sirdar Ja'fari, 'Ayyūb-gāhī kī Chāyā meṁ Pākistānī Buddhijīvī' (Pakistani Intellectuals under the Shadow of Ayub-dom), in *Dharmayug*, October 24, 1965, p. 15 and *passim*.

world peace. And with reference to Josh, he mentioned an occasion in 1960 when Josh, having immigrated to Pakistan, had first been asked to write a poem in praise of the President of Pakistan but was later not allowed to read it on the grounds that the poem was considered too critical. Ja'fari reminded his readers, 'This poem is the more important to us because all his life Josh opposed the policies of the Muslim League and its demand for the partition of the country; and supported the Nationalist Movement. God knows what foolish notion caused him to migrate to Pakistan in 1955, but it is a matter of joy that he still maintains his revolutionary attitude.'<sup>14</sup> At the end of the article, Ja'fari concluded that conditions must change in Pakistan, and until that happens Indian writers should continue to express their friendship and sympathy for the Pakistani masses.

This article, with its blatantly confused motives, provoked a strong rejoinder from Kamleshwar, a politically independent, important Hindi writer, who asserted that if a writer himself was not willing to be a tool in the hands of others, he could always remain silent.<sup>15</sup> Kamleshwar expressed scepticism about the alleged revolutionary attitudes of Josh and Faiz and pointed out that Josh had been invited to Pakistan by the people in power there, not by the masses; that Faiz had taken part in war *musha'irahs*, and also that his symbolic verse could be interpreted as an attack on India rather than on the power setup in Pakistan.<sup>16</sup> Further, he questioned the motives

<sup>14</sup> Ibid. p. 15.

<sup>15</sup> Kamleshwar, "*Faiz-gāhī kī Chāyā meṅ Bhāratīya Buddhijīvī*" (Indian Intellectuals under the Shadow of Faiz-dom), in *Dharmayug*, November 21, 1965, p. 10 and *passim*.

<sup>16</sup> The verses in question are:

*dīda-i-tar pi vahāṇ kaun nazar kartā hai*  
*śīṣa-i-ḡaṣm meṅ kūṇ-nāb-i-jigar leke ḡalo*  
*ab agar jāo pay-i 'arz-i-talab un ke huzūr*  
*dast-o-kaṣkol nahīṇ, kāsa-i-sar leke ḡalo*

behind Ja'fari's article by asking why the fates or the writings of Pakistani poets should be of concern to Urdu writers in India. Ja'fari never replied to Kamleshwar's criticism, but other

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Who pays there any attention to tearful eyes?

Carry in the goblets of your eyes your heartblood.

If you go to him again to seek your desire,

Don't go with a begging bowl, carry your head in your palm.

According to Ja'fari, these verses indicate a radical change in Faiz's attitude: instead of simply showing despair at the state of affairs in his country, Faiz now calls for a drastic, revolutionary stance from those who seek to bring about political and social changes in Pakistan. Kamleshwar, however, contends that these verses should be interpreted in the light of what was being written in Pakistani journals in 1965. He asserts that in these verses Faiz was asking his compatriots to assume an aggressive attitude against India, in much the same way as the editor of *Dawn* (Karachi) was asking at that time. This, of course, was very unfair. Kamleshwar was considering these verses in isolation from what Faiz had said and written all his life. He was also taking unfair advantage of the ambiguity inherent in the symbolic language of the ghazal. In his support Kamleshwar also quoted Khwaja Ahmad Abbas, the Urdu writer, English journalist, and Hindi film-maker, who wrote in his weekly column in *Blitz* (Bombay): "F" is also for Faiz Ahmad Faiz, the Pakistani poet and intellectual, who should now reject the Lenin Peace Prize (which he received on the recommendation of India's Progressive writers) for tacitly supporting Ayub-Bhutto's war-mongering against India. Has he forgotten his own stirring verses—*bol ki lab āzād haiṅ tere // bol zubān ab tak teri hai?*' Abbas's hypocritical remarks need no comment. In all the material I looked at for this study I came across only one reference to Faiz, and that to a ghazal of his which was included in an anthology of war poetry. Though I was not able to secure the book itself, the couplets quoted from that ghazal seemed to give no basis to Abbas's allegation of 'war-mongering.' In fact, I later learned from some friends in Pakistan that Faiz's reticence during the period of conflict actually caused some displeasure in both official and literary circles. He wrote only two poems directly in response to the war of September: '*Blak-ā-ūṭ*' (Blackout) and '*Sipāhī kā Marsiya*' (An Elegy for a Soldier). Neither does any sabre-rattling. As for the verses quoted by Ja'fari, Faiz wrote them in January 1965, long before the war. All three are included in the collection entitled *Sar-i-Vāḍi-i-Sinā*. Faiz Ahmad Faiz, *Nuskahā-i-Vafā* (Lahore, 1985), pp. 35–36, 38–40, and 30, respectively.

Hindi and Urdu writers did, and the debate eventually spread to several Urdu magazines and dailies.<sup>17</sup>

More questions were raised. Why didn't Indian Urdu writers bring up these matters for discussion before the crisis? Why did they write non-controversial things and hide these sentiments, when they had the opportunity all the time to expose their Pakistani readers to these truths? The questions seemed to be directed mostly toward the elders of the Progressive Movement who over the years had come to form a kind of literary establishment, controlling magazines, radio and film industry jobs, and cultural embassies. Nobody, however, really tried to answer these questions; they either denied their own complicity or expressed amazement at the extent of their 'self-deception.' No one faced the really important issues: Why did Ja'fari consider it important to defend Faiz and Josh? Why did Urdu writers in India feel obliged to establish their loyalty as citizens of India? Why was their integrity questioned by Hindi writers, especially when some younger Hindi writers did not hesitate to make public their sentiment that they abhorred all wars and felt no obligation to write war

<sup>17</sup> Ata Muhammad Sholah, 'Kyā Joṣ Sāhib ek Buddhijīvī haiṅ?' (Is Josh Sahib an Intellectual?), in *Dharmayug*, December 5, 1965, p. 16. Ram Manohar Tripathi, 'Faiz-ṣāhī aur Ayyūb-ṣāhī banām Bhāratīya Buddhijīvī' (Faiz-dom and Ayub-dom versus Indian Intellectuals), in *Dharmayug*, December 12, 1965, p. 17. Ram Lal, 'Ḍup Rahne kī Bhūl' (The Error of Remaining Silent), in *Dharmayug*, December 19, 1965, p. 10. Dr. Abdul Wadud, 'Pākistān kā Nāpāk Hamla aur Bhārat ke Urdū Kaviyon kī Prakhar Vānī' (The Infamous Attack by Pakistan and the Sharp Rejoinder of Indian Urdu Poets), in *Dharmayug*, January 9, 1966, p. 17. Begum Shahnaz Zaidi, 'Pākistānī Lekhak aur Ham' (Pakistani Writers and Us), in *Dharmayug*, February 6, 1966, p. 17. Hayatullah Ansari, 'Pākistānī Adīb' (Pakistani Writers), two editorial articles in *Qaumī Āvāz* (Lucknow), January 6 and 7, 1966.

poetry?<sup>18</sup> It is not my concern here to give my own answers to these questions, but while raising them I was reminded of Brecht's Galileo, who countered his friend's remark that unhappy was the land that bred no hero with the reply, 'Unhappy is the land that needs a hero.'

Before 1965, all major Urdu writers had regularly published in Pakistani magazines, with the Indian often outnumbering the Pakistani contributors. The hostile attitude toward Urdu in North India, as well as the lack of financial support and sufficient circulation, had brought about a situation in which there were only few good literary magazines left in the country. After the war, there has been a concerted effort among Indian Urdu writers to start literary magazines of a high standard.<sup>19</sup> This does not mean that Indian writers have stopped publishing in Pakistani magazines. They still do, and in good numbers. On the other hand, Pakistani writers have generally found it unnecessary to send their material for publication in

<sup>18</sup> Yugeshwar, 'Yuddha, Sāhitya, aur Rāṣṭriya Sandarbh' (War, Literature, and National Integration), in *Dharmayug*, December 5, 1965, p. 16 and p. 23.

For whatever reason, not one Urdu writer (Pakistani or Indian) dared saying publicly what Shri Kant Varma, a prominent Hindi writer, did: 'Those who are demanding a war-supporting poetry are truly speaking an anti-humanistic language. . . . Only this can be the foremost duty of a poet during wars that he should protect high life-values and ideals from being carried away in the tide of madness, that he should come to the defence of poetry, beauty and art.' (Quoted in Yugeshwar, op. cit., p. 16.) The only exception among Urdu writers seems to have been Ja'fari, who in three poems dated August 29, 30 and September 3, 1965, denounced war and war-mongering in the most unequivocal terms. (*Pairāhan-i-Ṣarar*, pp. 49, 51, 53.)

<sup>19</sup> Writing in 2002, I recall only three independent magazines that already existed in 1965, *Sabras* (Hyderabad), *Kitāb* (Lucknow), and *Ṣā'ir* (Mumbai). The two important new magazines were *Ṣabkūn* (Allahabad) and *Guftugū* (Mumbai). The latter, edited by Ja'fari, closed after a couple of years; the former, edited by Shamsur Rahman Faruqi still continues as the premier Urdu literary magazine in India.

Indian magazines, and only a small number of them appear in India.

After the war, a proposal was made in Pakistan, expressing a desire that the name of the language should be changed from Urdu to Pakistani, to correspond to the name Hindi in India.<sup>20</sup> Coupled with this request was another demand, which, in fact, had been made prior to the war also: that Pakistani Urdu writers should no longer consider the language of Lucknow or Delhi as a standard, that more attention should be paid to incorporating into the written language the linguistic features of the Punjabi-influenced Urdu of West Pakistan. As a matter of fact, more and more Punjabi idioms and constructions are being used in Pakistani Urdu, just as more and more Hindi vocabulary is creeping into Indian Urdu. A related phenomenon is the publication in Pakistani magazines of ghazals and poems written in a mixture of Urdu and Punjabi. These seem to be a substitute for the so called *bhāṣā* poetry that was for some time very popular in Pakistan. This *bhāṣā* poetry, written in basically Urdu meters, contained a large number of words from the various dialects of Hindi. Except for the *dohās* of Jamiluddin Aali, most such poetry was of a superficial and imitative kind; it was, however, extremely popular in Pakistan, as was apparent to anyone who listened

<sup>20</sup> A. D. Azhar, 'Urdū yā Pākistānī?' (Urdu or Pakistani?), in *Nusrat*, No. 10, July 1966, pp. 7-17, and 'Pākistānī Urdū aur Hindustānī Urdū' (Pakistani Urdu and Indian Urdu), in *Nusrat*, No. 14, December 1966, pp. 9-25. This proposal by someone who was generally regarded as something of a maverick was not taken seriously by anyone, but its publication in a journal voicing the thinking of Zulfikar Ali Bhutto and his Pakistan Peoples Party was significant.

The difference in the vocabulary of Urdu newspapers from India and Pakistan mainly arises from the fact that Indian papers tend to use more Sanskrit-derived words, especially in political news. This difference, however, becomes extremely prominent when one compares the language of a Hindu conservative newspaper such as *Pratāp* with that of any Pakistani newspaper.



to the musha'irahs on the radio or read the more popular magazines. Such poetry is now seen or heard very rarely, while the new Punjabi-Urdu combination seems to be gaining general popularity as well as the support of the younger literati. The demand for changing the name of the language seems to have been only a brief idiosyncrasy.

Both sides have now come to a realization that the Urdu writers and intellectuals of India and Pakistan no longer share a common experience.<sup>21</sup> Most of them, especially the younger writers, feel that the social and political conditions in the two countries are vastly different, and any attempt to identify with each other on those grounds would be basically false. This sentiment has been one of the main causes for the decline of the Progressive Movement in both India and Pakistan.

In Pakistan, one notices that more and more younger people have started questioning the earlier tendency to claim the heritage of Harappa and Taxila as a formative element in the cultural identity of their young nation. They label it a false tradition and claim that it has nothing to do with the existing reality of Pakistan, that it can in no way serve in the creation of the new national identity. They either assert that the present moment is everything, that the question of identity is essentially an existential question and has to be solved by every individual in terms of his own internal resources and on the basis of his interaction with other such isolated beings; or else they say that Pakistan was established on the basis of the assertion that Muslims are different from Hindus and that assertion holds true even now, that nothing Hindu or non-Mus-

<sup>21</sup> These conclusions are based on a large and varied reading, mainly of books and magazines published in Pakistan in 1965 and 1966. Most of the sentiments described here were also echoed in the symposium '*Fankâr aur Difâ'-i-Vatan*' (op. cit.), which included as participants such noted Pakistani writers as Intizar Husain, Sajjad Baqir Rizavi, Ashfaq Ahmad, Hanif Ramey, Mukhtar Siddiqui, Gilani Kamran, Enver Sajjad, and Imtiyaz Ali Taj.

lim could serve any purpose in establishing a Pakistani national identity. Unlike India, where the dominant voice still is that of writers who fondly remember the common past, a majority of the writers in Pakistan feel that their country has more in common with Persia and the Arab world than with 'Hindu' India.

Also, in Pakistan, a majority of intellectuals and writers consider the recent conflict to have been of utmost importance for the establishment of a national identity. One of them said: 'Our experiences before the crisis were merely of an individualistic nature, at most shared by a few thousands or a few lacs. Even the experience of independence and migration was not the same for all of us. But the experience of these past days of crisis is the same for the entire nation and contains within itself a rare intensity and profundity. We now feel to be one nation more than ever before. In fact, if we want to become one nation the experience of this war will have to be of the utmost significance in the achievement of that goal.'<sup>22</sup>

Such sentiments were not expressed by any Urdu writer in India—either Hindu or Muslim—but several Hindi writers of a right wing bent of mind adopted a similar attitude. To quote just one of them, 'In Europe, war caused social disintegration, and, as such, that war was to be condemned and deplored. But in India, the recent war has proven to be an important means for social integration and social change, and hence it should be welcomed as something desirable and propitious.'<sup>23</sup>

<sup>22</sup> Naim Tahir, in '*Fankār aur Difā'-i-Vatan*,' op. cit., p. 36.

Also see: Ahmad Nadim Qasimi, '*Pākistānī Adab-kā Nayā Daur*' (The New Phase of Pakistani Literature), in *Barg-i Gul, Mujāhid Nambar*, pp. 282–84. 'The immediate issue for all Pakistani writers and poets is to catch this moment in their art, this fleeting moment which in fact is equal to a century in the history of our nation. If the writers and poets fail to do justice to the demands of this moment, they will be doing great injury to our culture and to our history' (p. 283).

<sup>23</sup> Yugeshwar, op. cit., p. 23.

The above developments suggest that the recent war between India and Pakistan may have brought about a kind of parting of the ways for the Urdu writers of the two countries. Certainly, if the fact that 'their' 'presents' are very much different continues to be bolstered, especially by contentions that their 'pasts' were also different, there is no reason why their 'futures' may not be different too.

I am, of course, aware of the fact that there still remain several mitigating factors, and that a perusal of current (1967) publications will give one a strong impression that nothing has changed. The writers of both countries continue to write in more or less the same language and publish in one another's magazines, thus remaining in a position to influence each other. So far, at least, the two governments have not done anything drastic to stop this intercourse, but neither have they done anything to encourage or enhance it. Indian writers are more widely read in Pakistan than are Pakistani writers in India, simply because the latter publish primarily in their own numerous magazines, which are not available for public sale in India. Arbitrary censorship and trade controls prevail on both sides. With reference to the differences in the vocabulary of newspapers and popular literature, it can be said that in both countries English words are being borrowed extensively, which not only keeps the Urdu of one country similar to the Urdu of the other, but also helps bring the total language closer to the other languages of the subcontinent, at least at the level of everyday speech. Further, some of the most important Urdu writers in India are Hindus and Sikhs, who make their own unique contribution to what we may conveniently refer to as the Urdu subculture. The fact that their writings continue to appear in Pakistan may turn out to be significant in the long run.

One can perhaps also find solace in the fact that many of the younger writers in both India and Pakistan seem to feel that literature should first and foremost be loyal to literary values, as is evident from a revival of interest in poets like Mir, Mushafi, and Miraji. Literary loyalties cut across political

and social loyalties and are also more enduring. Also, no doubt, the challenges of the emerging, anonymous urban society draw them together, as does the expansion of their intellectual horizon under the influence of contemporary Western thought.

But, if at any time these mitigating factors are drastically affected, it is quite likely that the trends set in motion in 1965 may result in producing two separate literary-cultural identities that will complement the existing separate national-political identities. In my opinion, when that happens, the writers of the two countries will find it possible to write more freely, having been relieved of any need to apologize for their politics. By becoming independent, at the level of ideology, of one another's approval or approbation, they might be able to generate an atmosphere of greater trust and respect. They will, no doubt, continue to communicate and interact with each other, but now in a different way than before, perhaps in much the same way as the English language writers of England and America do: as equals, as moderns, as artists. Which, still, is nothing to despair about.

\*

The following translations are of some of the more interesting Urdu poems written in immediate response to the conflict of September 1965.

## INDIA

### *Who is the Enemy?*

These cannons, tanks, bombers, and guns,  
Where did you get them?  
At whom are they aimed?  
Are these your gifts from the land of Waris and Iqbal?  
Raging forth from the fields of Nanak,  
You want now to burn the house of Kabir?  
Till yesterday you were slaves, and so were we.  
The season of freedom had come after a shower of blood.

Only the dawn's first breeze has moved,  
 Flowers have not yet opened their eyes.  
 The Spring has yet to smile.  
 Who knows how many blind stars—listless eyes—  
 How many pale roses—empty palms—  
 Are still thirsty for colour and light?

What else do we have beside this shared grief?

Together we should have sought the cure,  
 Planted the garden with our own hands,  
 And, sharing each other's sorrow, celebrated  
     the building of new homes.

But I see a strange look in your eyes;  
 Your lurching steps—what do they seek?  
 On whom will you test your sabre's edge?  
 This is not a mere boundary, as you think;  
 It marks the site of our body, heart, and soul.  
 Beautiful, tall, youthful, sacred, and chaste.  
 Its name is Kashmir, the paradise on earth;  
 Its name is Delhi; its name is Punjab;  
 We often call it with affection, Lucknow.

It must not be defiled by your swords' lips.  
 Tread here with respect, this is Ghalib's land.  
 Here is Mir's grave; Nizami's, Kaki's, and Chishti's too.  
 Let your blades prostrate on this holy ground.

Our hearts abound with friendship and love,  
 Our souls tremble in your behalf.  
 But we are also prepared—a saddening thought—  
 To discourage all lusting hands with swords.

There, on the other side, are sisters and brothers,  
 And others who share our memories of drunken nights.  
 There are some who shared our gibbets and cells,  
 Still others who were mocked, like us, in the streets.  
 Their lips still bear a well-remembered smile.  
 Their eyes hold dreams of long ago days.

Their hearts are alit with the future's hope.

They are all our own, in fact, who now seem strangers.

On this side, too, are old comrades;  
This side does not lack in friends either.  
Thousands of years bear witness to this fact.  
Here they all stand, their breasts radiant with wounds,  
Their hearts smitten with the memories of Heer's land,  
Their thoughts fixed on Ravi, Jhelum, and Chenab.

Between us rage rivers of fire—oceans of our blood—  
Tall, frowning barriers of hate.  
With a glance, however, we can tear them down;  
We can forget, forgive the cruel past;  
And again embrace you, yes, we can.  
But first you will have to break your swords,  
And cleanse out these bloodied garments;  
After that we shall be one, no more strangers.

You bring us flowers from the garden of Lahore,  
We bring you light from the dawn of Benares—  
Freshness of the Himalayan airs—  
And then let us ask together: Who is the enemy?

(September 12, 1965)

(Ali Sirdar Ja'fari, '*Kaun Duşman Hai?*' in *Pairâhan-i-Sarar*, pp. 54–56)

### *The Evening of Tashkent*

Let us make merry in a feast of love,  
For the stink of blood has disappeared.  
The clouds of gun-powder have rained and vanished,  
The war's last lightning has flashed and gone.  
It is now evening in Tashkent, so fragrant with roses.

Awaken the ambergris nights of the beloved's tresses,  
Light the camphor candles of those silvery arms,

Fill to overflow the goblets of long kisses.

Raise this red goblet—to the beauties of Tashkent,  
And this green goblet—to the fair-ones of Lahore,  
To the sirens of Delhi raise the white goblet  
In which is poured the colour of love's sun.

Many hued smiles glitter on the horizon—  
A sweet breeze stirs from the gentle talk—  
From every lip falls a nourishing dew  
That shall cleanse and bring forth our hopes' dawn.

No grief shall now dishevel any tresses—  
No youth shall have to cross the vale of fear—  
Brave men shall not disembark on the death's shores—  
Never shall blood and dust smear a bride's hair—  
'Good News' shall never come again to a mother—  
No one shall ever 'Congratulate' orphans.

Though a horde of flowers shall spring from this land,  
No one will know whose eyes have become narcissi,  
Whose forehead this rose, whose lips the poppy,  
Whose outstretched arms these dancing branches.

Only this will be said: This land is of the braves,  
Of the nameless monarchs of the beauty's kingdom,  
Of the lovers who dreamt of roses and died for dew.

May this dew rain endlessly on this land.  
May this land never thirst for blood again.

New Delhi, January 10, 1966.

(Ali Sirdar Ja'fari, '*Tâsqand kî Şâm*,' in *Pairâhan-i-Şarar*,  
p. 93.)

*To the Aggressor*

If fate has given you a perceptive sight,  
Then witness our firmness, having seen our patience.  
We bring joy to the gatherings of peace;

We add lustre to the fields of war;  
You have seen us do the first, now witness the second.

Our history can tell you in its language of time  
That we never make the first move in a war.  
Our practice is to fight only in defence.  
And in that endeavour we never stop.

We repeat once more, our neighbour land,  
We have nothing against your common man.  
Our actions give meaning to the words of peace,  
Our aim is friendship, we seek not strife.

Two tyrants ride roughshod over you today,  
Their heads filled with aggressive airs.  
They struck the first blow at our land;  
They are the only cause of this war.

They call it Jihâd, what a shame.  
What they do is mischief, it is not Jihâd.  
How can they achieve that glorious thing,  
For they practice murder, and pursue only war?

They have kept you away from democracy;  
Your questions have gone unanswered.  
Alas, in this age of enlightenment,  
They have never allowed you a choice.

(Jagan Nath Azad, '*Pahal Karnevâle ke Nâm*,' in *Lahû-Tarang*, p. 84–85)

#### PAKISTAN

##### *The Wall of Sialkot* (an excerpt)

I had heard that the age of miracles had past,  
That the new age bowed to the gods of rational thought,  
That God Himself—



lost in the tales of doubts and fears, more and less, gain and loss—  
 Had disappeared into space, far from Man's habitat,  
 Into some paradise of blissful dreams.  
 That here on earth only one thing was real:  
 Each living thing suffered its own grief.  
 No other reality, everything a fantasy.  
 No Universal Truths.

My values and yours,  
 My honour and yours,  
 My truth and yours,  
 All different, all separate.  
 No Truth that could be burnished by our blood.  
 Only we, caught in Ahraman's net.  
 Only we, lost in the labyrinth of darkness.  
 Each man a caretaker of his own tomb,  
 Constantly lamenting at his own grave.  
 A death raged in every town, but no Messiah was seen.  
 A fire blazed in every corner, but no Abraham appeared.  
 In wave after wave darkness moved, but no Moses came.

But now the wall of Sialkot speaks:  
 I am the Abraham, the Moses, the Messiah.  
 An age of miracles is here again.  
 Arise, for fires are blazing again, and I am the Abraham.  
 Arise, for the army of darkness is at hand, and I am the Moses.  
 Arise, for death is raging in every town, and I am the Messiah.  
 Once more an age of miracles has come.  
 A thousand towns arose and disappeared,  
 But I have remained here all the time.  
 I swear by the martyr-blood of Muradpur,  
 I am still alive and well.

(Muhammad Safdar Mir, '*Siyâlkoṭ kī Fasîl*,' in *Naqş*, p. 445)

*September 6, 1965\**

The moon had risen that night too, but bloodied  
 like an innocent's corpse.  
 The stars were glittering too, but like shreds of some divine form.

The fragrance of the flowers was restless, like a mother in search of her child.

The trees shrieked at the slightest touch,  
so sharp were the gusts of the wind.

In that wakeful hour, that treacherous night pierced  
deep into the heart of my history.

Its ruthless army carried infants on its bayonets' points.

The courtyard of every house was awash with its owner's blood.

Every field was left smouldering under a flaming cloud.

All roads were blocked, all lanes were filled with corpses.

The city was filled with crowds, yet a heavy loneliness lingered.

Then—one after another—the dawn's footsteps were heard,

And then, with a bang, the sun jumped out on the horizon.

No more was felt the night's dread, the dark's tyranny;

The banner of light was unfurled everywhere.

Each ray, plunging into the darkness, came out,

Holding a shred of night's torn cloak in its teeth.

This day is that bright chapter of my history

That has made a nation aware of its identity.

Let the worshippers of darkness know for the final time:

I am dawn. I am light. I am a reality.

I repay love with love; for my enemies I spell doom.

In peace, I am a wave of fragrance,

In war, all dignity and fortitude.

My enemy has challenged me, now he cannot escape,

For I am the earth's anger and also the heaven's rage.

(Ahmad Nadim Qasimi, '*Che Sitambar*,' in *Naqs*, p. 396.)

\*The date on which Indian forces moved toward Lahore.

### *Forecast*

He gave a hollow laugh,  
holding open his book of zodiac charts,  
then, fixing his gaze on me, mumbled:  
From here to there

Not even one green leaf can I see.  
 Not even one melodious note of a flute,  
 Not even one pair of gazelle eyes,  
 Not even one glittering tear  
 Exists anymore.  
 Nothing remains.  
 Except for smoke and ashes and drops of blood;  
 A few charred bones in the earth's womb;  
 Shreds of half-burnt letters;  
 Skeletons of trees;  
 Flying pieces of homes;  
 An empty, restless wind on deserted streets—  
 Except for these I can see nothing  
 From here to there.

For a long time I listened to the old astrologer,  
 and gazed through a veil of tears in my eyes  
 at the prosperous couples on busy streets.  
 Then suddenly somewhere a bugle sounded,  
 And suddenly he jumped out in front of me—  
 That naked ogre with long, curling nails—  
 Who had from the first dawn lay hidden in my eyes,  
 And fattened itself on my blood.

(Wazir Agha, 'Pes-go 'î,' in *Naqs*, p. 451.)

*The Bond of Cup and Wine*

Who knows when  
 The moon will reappear from behind the clouds  
 And the friends' gathering place be illumined?  
 Roads, demanding light; paths, mere shadows.  
 Our hearts, burdened with pain, witless,  
 Sinking, trembling, filled with fear, dying out,  
 Bludgeoned by the dawn, kicked at by the night.

Who knows when  
 The shore will reappear out of the whirlpool's fangs?  
 When will the thrashing waves be quiet?  
 A raging storm, a mysterious wind;

The earth, deported to unsafe spaces;  
The air, no friend; the sky, no comforter.  
The tribes have discarded all ties of love;  
How will the wounds heal, the torn breast mend?  
All the borders have become fields of fire;  
Who knows if the gazelles meet this year?  
And even if they do, who knows what may be said?  
Who knows if the bond of cup and wine may be remembered?

(Mustafa Zaidi, '*Riṣṭa-i Jām-o-Subū*,' in *Naqṣ*, p. 549)

## How Bibi Ashraf Learned To Read And Write\*

There exist only few documents of an autobiographical nature that cast light on the lives of the common people of South Asia prior to the twentieth century. Rarer still is one by a woman. That alone should make the account of Bibi Ashraf's education valuable to us. What adds to it is her words' simplicity, modesty, and poignancy, and the most important fact that her education mostly came about through her own efforts. Written for other women, in particular younger women, Bibi Ashraf's brief narrative makes us aware of the many odds against which young Muslim girls of even the upper classes had to contend in mid-nineteenth century North India if they sought to obtain the rewards of reading and writing. The following three sections consist of a biographical sketch of Bibi Ashraf, a translation of her autobiographical account, and a discussion of only two of the many significant issues brought to our attention.

### *Biographical Account*

Bibi Ashraf's full name was Ashrafunnisa Begum.<sup>1</sup> In calling her Bibi Ashraf, we follow the example of her biographer, Muhammadi Begum, and express both our affection and

\* Revised. Originally published in *Annual of Urdu Studies*, # 6 (1987), pp. 99-115.

<sup>1</sup> The biographical note is based on Muhammadi Begum, *Hayât-i Ashraf* (Lahore, n.d.), the only account available. I thank Hena Faisal Imam for gifting me a copy of a recent limited photo-reprint.

respect.<sup>2</sup> She was born on September 28, 1840, in a family of Shi'ah Syeds in Bahnera, a small rural community in Bijnor, Uttar Pradesh. Bahnera must have been a small *qasba*, for even in 1901, according to the District Gazetteer, its total population was 2, 582, of which the Muslims accounted for 1, 561; its main feature was a weekly market.<sup>3</sup>

Bibi Ashraf's ancestors were said to have come from Bukhara in Central Asia to serve under various Mughal kings. Her grandfather owned land in Bahnera and the family lived comfortably on the income from it. Nevertheless, Bibi Ashraf's father, Syed Fateh Husain, left Bahnera and moved to Agra, and then on to Gwalior, some 250 miles away, where he took up the profession of a lawyer. This development was much to the disgust of Fateh Husain's father, who couldn't understand why his son wanted to 'work' when he, the father, already had, 'thanks to God's kindness, enough to feed ten servants of his own.'

When Fateh Husain went to Gwalior, he didn't take his family with him—that was usual at the time—leaving them in Bahnera with his father. Bibi Ashraf was only eight years old when her mother passed away; she and her baby brother were then brought up by their loving grandmother and a not-so-loving aunt and uncle.

Soon after her birth, Bibi Ashraf was engaged to be married to a second cousin, Syed Alamdar Husain, who was then nine years old. The marriage was performed in 1859. Alamdar Husain had been educated in Arabic and Persian at the famous Delhi College in Delhi and, before his marriage, had been a

<sup>2</sup> Muhammadi Begum (1878?–1908), the first woman to edit an Urdu magazine, was also among the first women who wrote novels in Urdu. She edited *Tahzib-i-Nisvân*, a weekly magazine for women started in 1898 by her husband, Syed Mumtaz Ali (1860–1935). See Shaista Akhtar Banu Suhrawardy, *A Critical Survey of the Development of the Urdu Novel and Short Story* (London, 1945), pp. 123–130; and Gail Minault, *Secluded Scholars: Women's Education and Muslim Social Reform in Colonial India* (New Delhi, 1998), pp. 110–121.

<sup>3</sup> *District Gazetteers of the United Provinces of Agra and Oudh*, Vol. XIV, Bijnor (Allahabad, 1928), p. 304.

deputy inspector of schools in Jalandhar District in the Punjab. When that position was terminated for some reason, he returned to Bahnera, but after the marriage he took his wife to Lahore where he taught Arabic at a school. In 1865, Alamdar Husain was hired as the Assistant Professor of Arabic and Persian at Government College, Lahore, which had been established only the previous year. The young couple had four children, of whom two—a boy and a girl—died very young. Alamdar Husain himself was consumptive and succumbed to the disease in 1870,<sup>4</sup> leaving the Bibi Ashraf to fend for herself and the two surviving daughters in Lahore. By then Bibi Ashraf's grandparents were dead; then, just a few months later, her father too passed away.

Alamdar Husain was well regarded by his superiors as well as by the gentry of Lahore, and many of them now tried to help the bereft family. The Director of Public Instruction in the Punjab, Captain W. R. M. Holroyd,<sup>5</sup> at the recommendation of a local notable, offered Bibi Ashraf a small teaching job and the girls scholarships of five rupees per month. Bibi Ashraf declined the job, preferring to support her family on the little she could earn from sewing clothes—a skill she had been taught at home in Bahnera—and making lace—a skill she had learned from a neighbour at Lahore. She accepted the scholarships, however, and had her daughters enrolled in a girls school. But there were always too many mouths to feed, for Bibi Ashraf had several children of her many relatives staying with her while getting their schooling in Lahore. Eight years later, when she was again offered a teaching position, she accepted, and began to teach at Victoria Girls School, a semi-government primary school. Her starting salary was Rs. 15.00 p.m. (Her formally educated husband's starting salary at the government school at Lahore had been twice as much.) She

<sup>4</sup> Alamdar Husain became seriously ill in August 1869, and died on May 14, 1870. When Alamdar Husain went on sick leave, his temporary replacement was none other than Muhammad Husain Azad, the author of *Āb-i-Hayât*, who was later made permanent at a salary of Rs 150/- per month (Aslam Farrukhi, *Muhammad Husain Āzād: Hayât aur Tasâñif* (Karachi, 1965), pp 212–2130.

<sup>5</sup> The founding patron of 'non-decadent' Urdu poetry.

worked hard and eventually became the school's senior teacher, with a salary increase of ten rupees. Bibi Ashraf also strove to improve the school's instructional reputation, and eventually saw it raised to the level of a middle school. She continued to work until she died, following a short illness, on May 7, 1903.

Bibi Ashraf was a woman of fortitude and determination. By the time she was thirty, she had lost her mother, grandmother, two of her four children, her husband, and her father. Even the two remaining daughters predeceased her; one dying in her youth, unmarried, the other leaving behind a baby boy, who too didn't survive long. Muhammadi Begum writes that a student of Bibi Ashraf's later told her:

When I started school, the two daughters of *Ustâni Sahiba* [Bibi Ashraf] had already died. She was still grievously affected, and constantly shed tears remembering them. She would put a piece of cloth on her face under the eyes, and as she would teach her tears soaked into the cloth. When that piece would become too wet, she would squeeze it dry and put it back on her face.<sup>6</sup>

Bibi Ashraf was also a very gentle and caring person, generous to friends and strangers alike. She adored her students and fretted over them. At the same time, she cherished her independence. Though she observed strict purdah, she never sought to put the burden of her needs on anyone, preferring to live frugally and independently. She was also a deeply religious person, devoted to her Shi'ah faith which sustained her through her grief-ridden life. Every year during the month of Muharram, she observed the ritual mourning of the martyrdom of Imam Husain by holding regular *majâlis* at her house, as is wont among pious Shi'ahs, and distributing food among the poor.<sup>7</sup> Muhammadi Begum tells us of a most touching incident at one such *majlis*:

Once during Muharram, she was distributing the *tabar-ruk*—[in this case, breads that had been blessed in the

<sup>6</sup> Muhammadi Begum, *Hayât*, p. 32.

<sup>7</sup> *Majâlis*, pl. of *majlis* (lit., a gathering), refers in the Shi'ah culture of South Asia to gatherings that formally commemorate the tragedy of Karbala (680 AD).



*majlis*—to a small crowd of poor women gathered around her. Some of the women felt they had not received their proper share, and knocked her down together with the basket of breads. Some even started hitting her. When a part of her body began to feel numb, she said only this, ‘Please, ladies, don’t keep hitting at the same place.’<sup>8</sup>

She was, however, free of religious prejudice. She adored Muhammadi Begum—a Sunni Muslim—because of the latter’s pioneering efforts to spread education and new ideas among Muslim women. Muhammadi Begum recounts many instances of this love, including the following:

She told one of her relatives: ‘My uncle became very angry with me when I learned to read and write. I asked him to forgive me, and made him a promise never to write to any man, or even to any married woman who was not related to us. I kept that promise for a very long time, and broke it only in the case of the editor of *Tahzīb-i-Nisvân* [i.e. Muhammadi Begum]. Otherwise, I never wrote to any married woman, and if ever such a need arose I had either one of my students or someone else write for me.’<sup>9</sup>

When Muhammadi Begum started her weekly magazine, Bibi Ashraf contributed several poems and essays, including a most moving account of how, as a little girl, she taught herself to read and write. The original Urdu essay appeared in two instalments, in the issues dated March 23 and 30, 1899.

### *Translation*

#### ‘How I Learned to Read and Write’<sup>10</sup>

It had long been customary in my family to teach the girls how to read—teaching them how to write, however, was strictly forbidden. The girls were taught only to vocalize the Arabic of the Qur’an and read a bit of Urdu so that they could

<sup>8</sup> Muhammadi Begum, *Hayât*, pp. 64–65.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid. p. 56.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid. pp. 5–20. My translation is close to the original, though not overly literal.

gain some knowledge of their faith and the rules of prayer and fasting.

We were six girls altogether, of different ages, in our family. Our grandfather, may God grant him paradise, had hired a lady teacher [*ustânî*] for us. She lived with us and received ten rupees per month plus her food and clothes. The three older girls and the daughter of a maidservant had already finished the Qur'an, while I was reading the seventh section [*sipâra*] and the other two girls the eighth. A score or so of other girls who were our kin [*birâdarî*] would also join us. In this manner, you might say, a little school had started. Our teacher—may God grant her paradise—didn't know Urdu,<sup>11</sup> though she belonged by race [*qaum*] to a high-born [*ṣarîf*] Pathan family. The elders of my family had tried hard to find a lady teacher who could teach us Urdu, but none was found.

Our teacher would give us a holiday on Fridays. I well remember how every Friday all the girls would bring her a little flour, some rice, and a few pennies from their homes. Then they would jointly cook whatever she asked. She would tell them to make *roṭî*, *qorma* and *kabâb*, adding to that list sometimes *pulâo* and other times *zarda*, sometimes *firnî* and other times some savoury snack. She frequently asked them to cook other dishes too. She also taught them needlecraft. I was then quite young, so the teacher would ask me to do only the easier chores. But even at that tender age I was most eager to do every kind of work. I avidly watched whatever was being done and put in work beyond my capacity.

For several years our teacher taught us with much affection and care, never even taking a day off. Then suddenly one day, her mother came to our house and said, 'It would be a great favour to me if you would allow my daughter to come home for a fortnight. There is some important business to take care of.'

She took her home, and there she had her married to a Syed. I have heard it said that our teacher had been eleven at the time of her first marriage, and fifteen when she became a

<sup>11</sup> I take it that she spoke some local dialect, and not standard Urdu, and that she knew only to vocalize the Arabic of the Qur'an by a sort of rote.

widow. Twelve years had passed before she was married again. And during that entire time she had lived with utmost modesty and propriety—may God bless her soul! She was full of virtue and piety, and remained devoted to prayers and fasts till her dying day. The second marriage, which was clearly her religiously allowed privilege [*haqq-i-shar'*], was not in fact something she had wanted—she had merely given in to the pressure mounted by her mother.

Be that as it may, my grandfather was shocked when he heard the news. Out of his sense of shame, he didn't step out of the house for a whole month. Everyone reasoned with him: 'Why must you feel so bad? She was only a hired teacher in your household; she wasn't, God forbid, a kin.' My grandfather always replied, 'She was, nevertheless, the tutor to my girls. It shames me greatly if my girls' tutor should marry a second time. When I think of it I want to hide my face from the world.'

He sent word to our teacher never to cross our threshold again. He also wouldn't allow the Syed who had married her to come before him; he kept that vow as long as he lived. When we girls learned of these developments, we were all very grieved. Much worse, however, was the condition of our teacher, for she loved us very much—just as we loved her. There was nothing, however, that we could do except resign ourselves to the situation.

Then several members of the family suggested that another woman should be hired who could teach us Urdu as well as the Qur'an. But my grandfather didn't agree. He said, 'No, I can't bear even the thought of having an outsider [*gair*] in the house teaching my girls. I absolutely forbid it. Compared to such an education, it would be better if the girls remained illiterate.'

Modesty was such an integral value for my grandfather that he would have preferred that the girls didn't speak even to their own fathers and brothers. He used to say, 'Talking to her male relatives makes a girl disrespectful.' What chance was there then to have some male relative teach us? There were, no doubt, several poor and widowed women among the Syeds, but none dared to ask them. Thus, in short, stopped all formal instruction of the girls.

Eventually, as time went by, all the girls except me began to study with their mothers. But my mother, as my ill luck would have it, fell ill. I was at the time about seven or eight and my brother, may God preserve him, was just six months old. My mother was not as much worried about her own illness as she was concerning my lack of education, but there was nothing she could do. She was, however, the daughter of a *marsiya-kvân*, and herself knew how to recite a *marsiya*.<sup>12</sup> Even as she lay sick she taught me from memory a number of religious, benedictory poems [*mujre-salâm*]. Woe, a thousand times woe, that life failed her and she died while we were still so very young.

May God never deprive a child of her parents. My mother was sick for one whole year before she bade farewell to this world. That was the first scar on my heart. Later so many terrible things happened to me, both at home and elsewhere, and so many of my dear ones passed away, that neither my tongue has the strength, nor my pen the power, to describe them. Humankind has no choice but to accept whatever happens and remain grateful to God. What happened was for the best. What pleases my Creator pleases me.

I cannot describe the pain and grief I felt when my mother passed away. I thought of her day and night. I would wander through the house and break into tears at every place where my mother used to sit or sleep or say her prayers. If a *majlis* was held, I would cry all day long, for I would remember how my late mother used to participate. I was then too young to shed tears over the misfortunes of the martyred Imam and his blessed household. I didn't think anyone could be more afflicted with adversity than I was.

Let me tell you how ignorant I was then. For several years after my mother's death, I kept praying after the daily prayers for her to come back to life. I would recite the sacred names of God, feeling convinced that the blessed effect [*bara-*

<sup>12</sup> *Marsiya*, lit., an elegy; in Urdu, by itself, it refers to the elegies that commemorate Shi'ah martyrs. *Marsiya-kvân*, a professional elegy-reciter. *Mujrâ* and *salâm*, shorter benedictory poems that honour the Prophet and the Shi'ah martyrs. See the essay, 'The Art of the Urdu Marsiya,' in this book.

*kat*] of those names and my prayers would make her come alive. Not only that, I taught my little brother the same thing. He had been only eighteen months old when our mother left us and passed on. [When he was a little older] I taught him to raise his arms and repeat, 'May God bring Mother back.' From that day on, you could see him all the time raising his tiny arms in supplication and saying, 'May God bring Mother back. May God bring Mother back.' And when he sat in someone's lap he would press the person to repeat the words with him. If that person didn't respond, he would persist and soon begin to cry. But he would become very happy, if that person repeated the words with him. Those words of his would make even strangers burst into tears. Even now, that image has come back to me, and I am unable to calm my heart.

In short, it was simply amazing the way I used to cry at the time. My days were distracted and my nights sleepless. After the fortieth day observance of my mother's death [*câlîsvân*] the traffic of female relatives and guests stopped; still my endless tears continued. Then my grandmother told me what was right in religion, and what was wrong. 'Daughter,' she said, 'when girls shed tears over the martyrdom of Imam Husain—may peace be upon him—they doubtless get much spiritual reward [*savâb*], but it is a great sin for them to cry over the loss of their parents, or brothers and sisters, or other relatives. Then God gets angry with them, and that makes the deceased very discomforted. You must stop your endless crying. For if you don't, your mother will greatly suffer and become angry at you. On the other hand, if you wish to make your mother happy, there is nothing better than for you to read some prayer in her name, and offer its reward to her.'

'What should I read?' I asked her. 'And how should I offer her its reward?'

'The seven sections of the Qur'an [that you have learned to read],' she replied. 'You should read them every day. Then lift your hands to God and say, "I offer their reward to my mother's soul." That will please her very much.'

From that day on, I made it a daily habit to read those seven sections. In fact, I would read each section several times, and offer its reward to my mother's soul. The constant repetition greatly improved my reading skills. I could now de-

cipher new matter, and began to read forward on my own. In that manner—through God's favour and my own efforts—I finished the Qur'an in just one year, and had a *majlis* to celebrate the occasion.

I was, however, still dying to learn to read Urdu, but I couldn't find any woman who could teach me. Why was I so eager to read Urdu? In our house, during the forty day observance of Muharram, separate *majâlis* for men and women were held every day. In addition, a *majlis* was held every Thursday in fulfilment of someone's or other's vow. That was the reason I was so keen to read Urdu. All the ladies in my family knew Urdu quite well. When they visited other homes—on some happy or sad occasion—or when other ladies came similarly to visit with us, my female relatives would read aloud from books on matters of faith and religious observances. Listening to them, I came to know by heart a lot about such matters—just as one does listening to stories—but that didn't at all lessen my keenness to become blessed myself with the gift of reading.

Once, I went to every lady in the family and begged her to teach me just one or two words every day. I said, 'Teach me and I would be your slave for life.' But not one of them was moved in the slightest by my pleading. Each lady the same response: 'Girl, have you gone crazy? You better find some cure for your madness. First of all, tell me what will you do with it even if you learned to read? Secondly, why do you think it is that easy to teach someone to read? It's not an easy task. It demands much hard work. I don't have so much energy that I should waste it on you.'

When I heard those words again and again, I lost all hope and began to cry. In fact, I felt so hurt that I screamed. But that only made them angrier.

They said: 'That's just wonderful! Now you're trying to scare us with tears. Well, your silly tears don't scare anyone. It's terrible the way you go around whining and wailing just because you wish to read. We never saw a girl like you. Most girls run and hide if someone even mentions books. Children your age have to be scolded and spanked to make them read. You, on the contrary, weep and wail wanting to read. Your inauspicious, constant crying has already lost you your

mother, who knows what your tears will do next. Don't come near us. Go, cry somewhere else! You only make us fear for the future.'

Those remarks totally devastated me, and my tears just poured out. Then the ladies said: 'For God's sake, girl, go away! If your grandmother sees you crying she would just assume that we must have said something nasty to her darling granddaughter.'

Only my God knows how I felt when I heard those words. My parents had brought me up with much love. They had always used gentle language in my presence, never saying a harsh word to anyone. That is why I was not accustomed to hearing such cruel remarks. The words of those ladies were like salt to my wounded heart. I wiped my tears and walked away. When I was by myself, I prayed to God: 'Most Benevolent God, show me mercy and guide me across this dreadful chasm to my goal. If ever I get to learn how to read, I shall, God willing, teach that skill to anyone who desires it, and even forcibly to those who may not want to learn, for I shall never forget, so long as I live, the anguish I feel right now.'

Later, one night, as I was beset with similar thoughts, it occurred to me that if I had a *salâm* or a *mujrâ*, I could myself figure out the words and start to read. What was so difficult about that! After all, I already knew the letters of the alphabet. What did I care if no one wanted to teach me? That thought so enhanced my courage and hope that the very next morning I sent a maid to all my friends with this message: 'I need some *salâm* and some *mujre*. Please let me borrow some from you. I shall have them copied and then returned.' May God ever keep them happy, for all of them sent me some.

But who was there to copy them for me? I used the same excuse again, and said to my grandmother, 'Please get me some paper. I shall ask Uncle to copy these poems for me.' She immediately sent someone to the market and got me some paper. Now the question was, how should I make copies, and where should I hide myself as I do that? For it would have been disastrous for me if anyone even suspected that I was trying to write. I had no mother to cover up for me, and writing was strictly forbidden to girls. How was I then to reach

my goal and also keep it secret? My aunt was already furious; she would call me nasty names for reading the Qur'an so much. She used to say, 'Thank God, this girl hasn't learned anything else, otherwise she would have time for nothing at all.' God knows what she would have said if she had seen me writing!

After thinking over these matters at length, I decided that at noon, when everyone was resting, I would make some ink with the blacking from the griddle [*tavā*] and start copying. Believe me, that is exactly what I did. I got hold of some blacking from the kitchen, the clay lid of one of the water pots, and a fistful of twigs from the broom. Thus equipped I went up on the roof, pretending that I was going there to rest, and excitedly began to copy out words. I cannot tell you how happy I felt at that moment. Childhood is so innocent! No sooner had I copied a few words than I felt I had already won the battle. Before returning downstairs, I broke the ink-stained lid and threw away the pieces. That was the routine I followed for many days, using a fresh lid every day to make the ink in. The ladies would find the water pot lidless and grumble: 'Who's the wretch who steals the lid every day? May God break her arms for doing that.'

I felt so ashamed and so very scared. I was afraid someone would find out how bad I had been, and would scold me. Not having the sense to consider my misplaced boldness a sin, I feared people and not God. My intense desire made me blind to these matters. I didn't give up my improper ways, and continued to blacken one sheet of paper after another with my scribbles. I couldn't, however, read or understand what I was writing. I didn't have the sense to know that one cannot learn to read without a teacher. I believed that just as other skills could be learned merely by watching others and imitating them, the same with would be the case with reading. As a result, I spent a great deal of time and effort, but for nothing. When I couldn't make any headway, my crying spells started again. Then God found me a teacher.

One morning, as I was reading the Qur'an, the son of my grandmother's sister came by. He saw what I was doing and asked, 'Sister, can you read the Qur'an?'

'Yes, I can,' I replied.



He said, 'I would be ever so grateful if you could help me learn my lessons. I have difficulty memorizing the daily assignments, and consequently get thrashed by the teacher. You will be doing me a big favour.'

'Don't call it a favour,' I replied. 'I'll be happy to teach you every day.'

That made him so happy that he pulled up his shirt, and showed me his back. It was covered with welts. My heart welled up for him, and from that day on I would not only go through his day's assignment with him, but also help him prepare the text ahead. He never got a thrashing again.

That boy's coming to me for help was how God took pity on my despair, and my fortune took a turn for the better. It happened this way. One day a book fell out of the boy's bag. I picked it up and began to flip its pages. The writing had no diacritical marks to indicate the correct pronunciation. I asked him, 'What book is this? The script looks like that of a *mar-siya*. Here, read me some of it.' The boy did. I liked the book's contents, and my hope was revived. I said to him, 'I would cherish your kindness all my life if you would teach me to read this book.'

He flatly refused. 'I don't have the time,' he said. 'Also, the book is very difficult—you will never learn to read it.'

I replied, 'I'll work very hard to memorise the lessons. You need only consent to teach me.'

'No, I can't' he said, 'I don't think I can teach you this book.'

I was very hurt when he said that. 'If you won't teach me this book,' I retorted, 'I won't help you with your lessons.' Then I started to weep.

My words made him recall the beatings. 'Don't get angry,' he quickly responded. 'Here, read.'

How relieved I felt! Wiping my tears, I recited the '*Bismillâh*,' and began to study with him every day. But I hadn't finished even three pages when his father sent him away to study at Delhi. I was so depressed when he left. He was just a child, what could he teach? He never showed me how to syllabify words, nor did he explain the meaning of the text—but even the little that he did was a lot to me.

Once again I fell into despair. I went around begging everyone to teach me, but no one did. Finally I started reading that book on my own. I would look at new words, and if I recognized any familiar letters in them I would put them together. Slowly, in that piecemeal manner, I began to figure out whole words, and read on, half right, half wrong. I would also memorize whatever I read. In this fashion I read the entire book. I then tried the same method with other books and eventually began to read Urdu fairly well. Then I turned to all those *mu-jre* and *salâm* that I had earlier copied without understanding a word. You cannot imagine how happy I was the day I read those copies. I don't think there has been a happier day since. As I read my own handwriting I felt doubly encouraged and that much more confident. I told myself, 'Whatever someone gets, he gets through his own efforts. By God's grace, I now possess what I had so keenly sought, if not perfectly then at least poorly.' I then went back to those broom twigs and that kitchen blacking, and, regarding them as my teachers, began to copy sentences from different books. Only a few days' practice later, I could write from memory. No one, however, discovered my secret.

At that time my father worked as a lawyer in Gwalior. After my blessed aunt passed away, my father had my uncle come and live with him. My father had two children, my brother and I, and my uncle had two sons. For the sake of the children, my father didn't marry again, nor did he allow his brother to remarry. A great many proposals came from among our own relatives, but my father turned them all down. His reply was always the same: 'Men marry a second time because they desire children. We already have children. It would be improper for us, therefore, to remarry and bring home a possible foe to these innocent children. We don't live at home; we live away in another city. God knows what trouble could develop in our absence.'

After my uncle left Bahnera and joined my father at Gwalior, the fact that I could write was discovered by the ladies at home. How long could I hide it? In any case, it was my uncle that I had mainly been scared of, for he strongly disapproved of women's learning to write. After he was gone, I began to practice writing openly. No one objected. On the contrary,

my skill at writing was viewed as a novelty by my relatives, and also by others. Whenever any woman had the need to send a letter, she would come to me to get it written. On my part, I gladly transcribed, any which way I could, whatever was dictated to me. During the process, the women would disclose to me their innermost secrets; they would tell me things that they would never speak of in front of anyone. And their letters brought replies. I could understand, however, only a tenth part of what was dictated to me.

Another thing. I knew only one way to address someone [*alqâb*] in a letter, and I used that one form all the time, regardless of the age or relationship of the addressee. One lady had me write letters to her husband. This is the way I addressed her husband on her behalf: 'Dear young man, light of my eyes, comfort of my life, pupil of my eye—may your life be long!'<sup>13</sup> I used these words in all her letters. Finally the husband wrote, 'I can fully understand your letters, for their language is just like your own speech. But tell me this, where did you find this strange scribe who knows only one way to address people? Do tell him kindly not to use these words to address me.' That day onward, whenever that lady would ask me to write a letter she would say, 'Write only this at the beginning: "Let the father of Muhammad Husain know. . . ."'

When the Mutiny occurred [in 1857] it stopped all exchanges of letters. Consequently, for nearly eighteen months, we received no letter from my father, nor could we write to him. All of us were terribly worried about each other. Finally, when some peace returned, my father sent a man to Bahnera to get our news. When he was ready to return to Gwalior, my grandmother gave the man a letter that she had her brother write for her. I too gave him a letter—a letter that I had written myself—containing all that I had seen or heard of the Mutiny. Yes, even in that letter to my father and my uncle, I used those same words: 'Dear young man, light of my eyes, comfort of my life. . . .'

<sup>13</sup> *Barkurdâr, nûr-i-çâsm, râhat-i-jân, qurrat-al-'ain, tûla 'umraha,*—an elegant and most appropriate way to start a letter, but to someone much younger—a son, for example.

My father was delighted when he read my letter. He wrote to my grandmother, 'The letter written by Uncle gave me the news of only the immediate members of the family. He didn't write about the other relatives. Nor did he write about the events of the Mutiny. The letter from the girl, however, made me very happy. She wrote what she had herself heard or seen. Her letter gave me the pleasure I get from a newspaper or a book of history. I read her letter every day. But do tell me, who taught her to write?'

My grandmother wrote back: 'No one ever taught her. She has learned through her own efforts, and out of her own desire.'

Then I wrote my father the whole story—how I had learned to write on account of my own intense desire. He rewarded me by sending me an expensive comforter and several suits of clothes, having had them sewn for me in Gwalior. But my uncle, may God grant him peace, was very angry when he learned that I could write. He wrote me a chiding letter, and never quite forgave me.

That is the story of how I learned to read and write, and now it is finished. With much toil and struggle, I eventually managed to obtain a little skill. I rest content with it, and I thank God for His kindness.

### *Discussion*

Reading Bibi Ashraf's narrative I couldn't help being reminded of the fictional heroines created by some of her male contemporaries, men like Nazir Ahmad (1830–1912) and Altaf Husain Hali (1837–1914), who were in the forefront of the reform movement among Indian Muslims during the second half of the nineteenth century, and were also particularly concerned with the plight of Muslim women. Both Nazir Ahmad and Hali built some of their writings around female characters possessing remarkable strength and intelligence; they also dealt with several issues that find mention in Bibi Ashraf's story. It may be instructive to take a look at a few of such issues, comparing Bibi Ashraf's account with the lives of Hali and Nazir Ahmad's more famous fictional heroines.

We learn from Bibi Ashraf that several women in her family knew how to read the Qur'an, but without understanding the Arabic; they could also read religious writings in Urdu, and were fairly informed concerning the regulations and conventions that governed their lives as Muslim women. We are told that the ladies in the house didn't normally teach their daughters themselves; the girls were taught by a woman teacher—usually some poor widow—who lived with the family. But, if it ever became necessary, the girls could study with their mothers. The male members of the family never offered to play the role of a teacher. Some of them, in fact, opposed female education.

Turning to the fictional heroines—Zubaida Khatun of Hali's *Majâlis-al-Nisâ* (1874)<sup>14</sup> and Asghari Khanam of Nazir Ahmad's *Mirât-al-'Arûs* (1869) and *Banât-al-Na'ş* (1873),<sup>15</sup> we find that neither was educated by her mother. Zubaida was taught by a woman teacher and by her own father—it was the latter, in fact, who taught Zubaida how to write. About Asghari's education we learn nothing except that her father wrote her edifying letters which she could answer on her own, and that her mother was not terribly smart even in the traditional sense. Asghari, of course, was smart, almost overbearingly. The two male writers/reformists created fictional fathers who took exceptional interest in the education of their daughters. For them and for the patriarchal society for which they were writing any initiative for reform and improvement had to come from the fathers if it had to have any effect. As for Bibi Ashraf, her father—somewhat of a rebel himself—could have helped her if he had been living at home, though perhaps only after the death of the domineering grandfather. He at least rejoiced in her success in educating

<sup>14</sup> See Gail Minault, *Voices of Silence* (Delhi, 1986), pp. 31–137, for a translation. Also her, 'Hali's Majalis Un-Nissa: Purdah and Woman Power in Nineteenth Century India,' in *Islamic Society and Culture*, eds. Milton Israel and N. K. Wagle (New Delhi, 1983), pp. 39–49.

<sup>15</sup> The English translation of *Mirât-al-'Arûs* by G. E. Ward, *The Bride's Mirror* (London, 1903) is now available again: Nazir Ahmad, *The Bride's Mirror=Mirat ul Arus: a tale of life in Delhi a hundred years ago* (New Delhi, 2001). See the essay, 'Prize-Winning Adab,' in this book.

herself. Her uncle and aunt, on the other hand, only made her life miserable for that very reason.

What is most curious, if not astonishing, is that even as late as the 1850s it was not considered proper for women to learn to write. This matter of there being a stricter prohibition against writing, as against reading, is not brought out in the reformist fiction—at least not so starkly. But we must note that Hali's heroine, Zubaida, was taught writing not by her *ustânî*, but by her father, and he did that only after Zubaida was eight and had already spent three years learning to read the Qur'an. Nazir Ahmad tells us nothing about Asghari's own education, but he makes writing an integral part of the curriculum of instruction at the girls school that Asghari starts—without referring to any stricture against it. That may be because both Hali and Nazir Ahmad were not concerned with literacy alone; they wished to emphasize women's education in general and the practical benefits that could accrue from it to both men and women of Muslim elite families.<sup>16</sup>

It was not as if Muslim women never learned to write—a few always did—but it is true that for centuries women were not generally considered suitable for knowing how to write. If we go by our sources on the education of the elite in the past—and it is among the elite that we find the women who wrote—we come across strong strictures against women being taught writing. The *Qâbûs Nâma* of Kaika'us ibn Iskandar written in 1082 is a book of edifying instructions that a nobleman composed for the benefit of his son;<sup>17</sup> it is a major text in the genre of *adab* literature and was fairly widely known throughout the Islamicate world. In the chapter on the upbringing of sons, its author has a few brief remarks con-

<sup>16</sup> In their deep devotion to the cause of female education, Hali and Nazir Ahmad were mavericks. Syed Ahmad Khan, for example, didn't consider it a critical issue; he felt that it might detract the Muslims from his main concern, the education of Muslim men. Similarly, Zakaullah. The latter, in his *adab* book, *Makârim-al-Aklâq* (1891), devoted one-fifth of the book to the instruction of the boys, but not a line to the girls'.

<sup>17</sup> Kaika'us ibn Iskandar ibn Qabus, *Qâbûs Nâma*, ed. Amin 'Abd al-Majid Badavi (Teheran, 1963). It was a great favourite of Akbar's, who had it read to him several times.

cerning daughters too, including, 'Do not teach her writing, for therein lies great danger.'<sup>18</sup> More than a century later, Nasiruddin Tusi in his far more famous book, *Aklâq-i-Nâsirî*, is much more strict: 'Teach the girls neither reading nor writing.'<sup>19</sup> Tusi's book was widely read for centuries and its influence on the thinking of South Asian Muslim elite cannot be overestimated. Prior to the introduction of English education in South Asia, practically every educated Muslim male read Tusi's book at some stage in his education.

Coming to the more recent times, we may note some comments of Maulana Ashraf Ali Thanawi (1863–1943), one of the most influential religious teachers and Sufi masters of the past century in South Asia. A prolific writer, he wrote countless books, including *Bihistî Zavar* (Jewellery of Paradise),<sup>20</sup> the first book of *adab* exclusively for women, which was for decades as much a part of an educated Muslim girl's dowry as a copy of the Qur'an. Maulana Thanawi was not averse to teaching women how to write—he included a chapter on writing in the book—but he had certain reservations. In an essay on women's education that he wrote separately in 1913, but then reprinted in a subsequent edition of the book, the Maulana concluded his seven pages long argument as follows:

The preceding discussion was concerned with the matter of teaching women to read. As for teaching them to write, there is nothing wrong with that except in cases where you get the impression that the girl might be somewhat brazen natured.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid. p. 116. Reuben Levy's translation, *A Mirror for Princes* (London, 1951), is based on a different manuscript; it has, '... do not teach [the daughter] to read and write,' (p. 125).

<sup>19</sup> Khwaja Nasiruddin Tusi, *Aklâq-i-Nâsirî*, eds. Mujtaba Minawi and Ali Raza Haidari (Teheran, 1977), pp. 229–30.

<sup>20</sup> Ashraf Ali Thanawi, *Bihistî Zavar* ('*Aksî*') (Delhi, n.d.). Initially published as separate sections at the beginning of the twentieth century, then compiled as a book and repeatedly revised, it has never gone out of print. The accessible but only partial English translation is Barbara D. Metcalf, *Perfecting Women: Maulana Ashraf Ali Thanawi's Bihishti Zavar* (Berkeley, 1990). Two more complete English translations—by Rahm Ali Al-Hashimi in India, and by M. Masroor Khan in Pakistan—are no longer available.

Writing is needful for domestic life. But if there is any fear of impropriety [on the part of the girl], it is more important to protect yourself from iniquity than to seek a thing that might be useful but is in fact not obligatory. Under such circumstances, don't let the girl be instructed in the art of writing, and do not let her write on her own either. This is the conclusion to which wise men have come concerning the question: how is writing for women?<sup>21</sup>

Later day readers of Hali and Nazir Ahmad—like myself—can get some sense of the severe hardships education-seeking women had to face only when they come across first-person accounts such as Bibi Ashraf's. It may, incidentally, be pointed out that, given the times, Bibi Ashraf's family seems to have been quite 'progressive'; her father left his ancestral home and developed a new profession for himself, and her husband-to-be, a much younger first cousin of her father, went to Delhi for education, as did the young boy who helped her with her first Urdu book. Apparently, by the 1850s, institutional education that led to professional careers in the new colonial system had become desirable for the sons in Bibi Ashraf's family; the education of the daughters, however, was still too controversial an issue. It is indeed remarkable that Bibi Ashraf, by no stretch of imagination a 'brazen' person, actively sought to educate herself and, when circumstances required it, didn't hesitate to take up a career.

Bibi Ashraf might have been just a few hours old when she was engaged to be married to a second cousin—such engagements were at the time more the rule than exception. She was nineteen when the marriage itself took place. Eleven years later, at the age of thirty, she became a widow, and had to take care of herself and her two surviving daughters. She stayed on in Lahore, far from her ancestral village in Bijnor, and eventually became a primary school teacher. Apparently, there never arose the possibility of a second marriage for her. We, of course, remember the fierce reaction of Bibi Ashraf's Syed grandfather to the remarriage of her Pathan teacher. But

<sup>21</sup> Thanawi, *Bihishti*, p. 85.



we should also recall that it was a Syed youth who had married the Pathan widow.

Widow remarriage was a major issue for the Muslims of South Asia during the nineteenth century. Islam allows, in fact encourages, remarriage of widows, but among the Muslim elite of South Asia widow remarriage occurred extremely rarely, and usually when dictated by some worldly gain. The first person to take up this issue and work for the removal of this pernicious custom was Syed Ahmad of Rae Bareilly (1786–1831),<sup>22</sup> who belonged to the tradition of Shah Waliullah and led a 'jihad' against the Sikhs on the Northwest Frontier, but died fighting the Pathans. He married the widow of his older brother, Syed Ishaq, in 1819, and declared the prevailing prohibition un-Islamic. A charismatic person, he had an extensive following among the Muslims of North India, and his example was emulated by those who followed him. His influence was particularly strong among the Pathans of U.P. and Rajasthan. It is possible that the family of Bibi Ashraf's female teacher had come under the influence of Syed Ahmad Shahid and his followers, and also the Syed who married the widow.<sup>23</sup>

Nazir Ahmad and Hali too were concerned with the issue of widow remarriage: the former wrote a novel, *Ayâmâ*, devoted to this subject, while the latter wrote a long poem, '*Munâjât-i Beva*.' Hali's poem, written in 1884, contains 448 rhyming couplets; a work of great pathos, it is in the form of a widow's prayer to God.<sup>24</sup> The widow, though resigned to her fate, is yet bold, or desperate, enough to question God as to why such a terrible fate was assigned to her, a woman. In other words, she complains on behalf of herself and also on behalf of the entire womankind. 'What profit lay in my existence?' she asks, 'Why did you create me?' Then, later: 'If peace and

<sup>22</sup> Muhammad Hedayatullah, *Sayyad Ahmad* (Lahore, 1970), pp. 106–109; M. Mujeeb, *The Indian Muslims* (London, 1967), pp. 396–97.

<sup>23</sup> Syed Ahmad's teachings had strong anti-Shi'ah elements; he was equally critical of the unorthodox or popular manifestations of mystical Islam.

<sup>24</sup> Altaf Husain Hali, *Masnaviyât-i-Hâlî*, ed. Murtaza Husain Fazil (Lahore, 1966), pp. 154–174. There it is titled, '*Beva kî Munâjât*.'

comfort had been our share // You would not have created womankind.' The poem refers to the fact that girls were often married away at a tender age and soon became widows. 'When the transient [admirer] came to the garden, // the flowers had not yet come into bloom. // But when the flowers finally bloomed, // the transient [admirer] was resting under dust.' Near the end of the poem, the widow says, 'God, You should summon to yourself the woman first, // or summon the man and the woman together; // or else, God, erase this custom from the earth // which has caused all love to perish here.' Hali, however, was a peaceful man; he concluded his poem with the widow asking God to fill her heart with His love alone, for her troubled heart had suffered enough.

Nazir Ahmad was different. He made the emotional and sexual needs of the young widow very much a concern of his novel, *Ayâmâ*, first published in 1891. He also pointed out how men exploited young widows in order to satisfy their own appetite. Nazir Ahmad's heroine dies at the end, but before her painful death she gathers together her relatives and neighbours and gives them a long sermon. She describes the evils of the custom that prohibited the remarriage of widows, using as examples her own life and the lives of some other widows. She also questions the logic of those who looked down upon a widow who remarried, when in fact widows sought marriage chiefly to protect their honour. {

Maulana Thanawi, too, denounced the prevailing custom, but couched his plea exclusively in religious terms. He accused women of being contemptuous toward the widows who got remarried, and told his female readers, 'Your faith will not be right unless you regard first and second marriages as co-equal. [The Prophet has declared,] "Those who revive some practice of mine will receive a reward equal to the reward received by one hundred martyrs." Consequently, anyone who strives to get widows remarried, as well as any widow who will remarry in order to gain the Prophet's approval, will get the blessings and rewards that accrue to one hundred martyrs.'<sup>25</sup>

<sup>25</sup> Thanawi, *Bihishti*, p. 433.

Bibi Ashraf never remarried, for that was something quite beyond her own powers. But in those areas of life where only her own determination and efforts mattered, she was exemplary. Though surrounded by hostile people, she taught herself to read and write. Later, when she became a widow with two young daughters, she preferred to live away from her village for the sake of the latter's education, choosing to support herself through her own hard work, first as a seamstress and then as a school teacher. Bibi Ashraf was not born super-rich like Hali's Zubaida Khatun, nor did she eventually become rich like Asghari Khanam, the 'superwoman' of Nazir Ahmad's two novels. She was born in well-to-do but modest circumstances and lived a life governed by modesty, piety, charity and service. Her innocence charms us just as much as her 'true grit' commands our admiration—and we must be grateful to Muhammadi Begum, another remarkable woman, for preserving Bibi Ashraf's memory for us.

## Popular Jokes and Political History: The Case of Akbar, Birbal, and Mulla Do-Piyaza\*

One bitter winter night, Akbar and his boon companion Birbal were enjoying the comforts of the fort at Agra, when a poor brahmin was ushered in. He described his abject poverty and asked for help. Akbar said, 'I understand brahmins can perform amazing feats. Can you walk into the Jamuna till the water reaches your chest, then stand there all night? If you do that without any help, I'll give you everything you want.'

Next day, when the court had assembled, Akbar asked about the brahmin. He was told that the man was waiting for his reward. 'Bring him in. I would like to question him,' he ordered. When the brahmin was brought in, Akbar said, 'Tell me honestly, how did you manage to stay warm all night?' 'Sir,' the brahmin replied, 'as I stood in the river under the palace I noticed a light in one of the windows. I fixed my eyes on it—that kept me warm.' 'Aha!,' exclaimed Akbar. 'So you warmed yourself with the help of a light from my palace! That's not how you were supposed to do it.' And he had him thrown out. As the brahmin was leaving the fort he ran into Birbal. When Birbal learned what Akbar had said, he gave the brahmin some instructions then himself went in to attend upon the Emperor.

Later that day, the Emperor and his close companions rode out to hunt in the forest nearby. Suddenly they saw a column of smoke rising in the air. They rode over to investigate and found that a man

\* Revised. Originally appeared in *Economic and Political Weekly*, 30:24 (June 17, 1995), pp. 1456–1464. The paper began as a response to a panel on 'Courtiers and Kings' at the Annual Conference on South Asia, University of Wisconsin, Madison, November 1986. A longer version was presented at the University of Toronto as the 1987 Aziz Ahmad Memorial Lecture. I dedicate the essay to the late novelist/historian who could also tell many a joke. Sheldon Pollock, Harbans Mukhia, and Ravinder Kumar were very helpful with comments.

had lit a fire under a tall tree. High above the fire, from a branch of the tree, hung a pot. 'What are you doing?' Akbar asked. 'Cooking some rice, sir,' the man replied. Akbar burst out laughing and said, 'You fool, why have you put your pot in the tree when your fire is down here on the ground? What good is that going to do?' At that Birbal stepped forward and said, 'Your Majesty, he is that same poor brahmin whom you accused of warming himself with the light from your palace window. Surely, if he could do that, he can now cook his pot of rice.' Akbar realized that he had been outwitted and gave the brahmin a suitable reward.

This is my version of a story I heard as a child. There were many other such bed-time stories. They always ended with Birbal coming up with a witty rejoinder or explanation, thus turning some impossible situation to his own favour, often making a fool of Akbar, his master. The tellers were illiterate Muslim men and women. Later, I found some of the same stories retold in textbooks, and many more in cheap booklets sold on sidewalks. Printed in both Hindi and Urdu, these can still be found in similar abundance. Here are a few examples to indicate the range and variety of this 'Birbaliana.'<sup>1</sup>

Once the Emperor posed a riddle by asking Birbal two questions which the latter had to answer with one sentence. The questions were: 'Why did the brahmin go thirsty? Why did the donkey feel depressed?' [*brahmin kyon pyâsâ? gadhâ kyon udâsâ?*] Birbal immediately replied, '*loṭâ na thâ*,' making a pun on the word *loṭâ*. As a noun, it answered the first question: the brahmin went thirsty because he had no pot with which he could draw water from a well. And as a verb, it answered the second question: the donkey felt depressed because it hadn't rolled in dust for some time.

Another type of 'challenge' stories are those in which the Emperor gives a half-line of poetry to which Birbal must add other lines and make a short poem. This challenge is called *Samasyâ Pûrti*, i.e. the resolution of a problem or filling of a

<sup>1</sup> All translations are mine unless otherwise indicated. I have often, however, re-told a joke instead of translating it verbatim. My thanks to Frances W. Pritchett, whose collection now deposited at the University of Chicago was a valuable resource.

gap. It is a fairly popular literary game in Sanskrit and associated languages, as also elsewhere.<sup>2</sup>

One day as the Emperor was enjoying the street scene from a palace window he saw a young woman go down the street carrying a pot on her head, and water was splashing out of the pot. Akbar wondered: why did the water splash? Then he answered the question himself: because the pot was heavy and the woman carrying it was young and delicate. He promptly composed a half-line: 'Why did the water in the pot splash?' Later, he asked Birbal to complete the verse. Without a moment's hesitation, Birbal recited a verse that said: 'A girl, intoxicated with youth, went to fetch water from the well. As she pulled up the heavy pot, the strain unstitched part of her tight bodice. She became agitated because she couldn't fully cover her shame. That's why water splashed from the pot.' The Emperor was immensely pleased.

Now some jokes.

Akbar, his son Prince Salim and Birbal went hunting. When the day warmed up, Akbar and Salim took off their heavy coats and gave them to Birbal to carry. Then Akbar said to Birbal in jest, 'It looks like an ass's full load.' Birbal replied, 'No, your majesty, more likely of two asses.'<sup>3</sup>

Once Akbar said to Birbal, 'Last night I saw in a dream that I fell into a pit of honey. Then I saw you, and you had fallen into a pit of shit.' 'How amazing, your majesty!' Birbal promptly responded, 'I had the same dream. And when we finally got out of our pits, I licked your majesty clean, and then you kindly did the same favour to me.'

One day Akbar said to Birbal, 'I want you to get me some bull's milk.' Birbal asked for a day's time, then he went home to his

<sup>2</sup> There is an anecdote in *The Arabian Nights*, involving Harun-al-Rashid and the poet Abu Nuwas, which is strikingly similar to this story. See Mia I. Gerhardt, *The Art of Story-Telling* (Leiden, 1963), p. 459. Similar poetic contests are also found in the Perso-Arabic literary tradition to which Urdu belongs.

<sup>3</sup> This, to my knowledge, is one of the oldest recorded Akbar-Birbal jokes; it is one of the three listed in a late 18th century Persian manuscript, *Mir'ât-al-Istilâh* (author unknown, date of composition: 1158 AH [1745 AD]), Khuda Baksh Oriental Public Library, Patna., f. 221a. I'm grateful to Dr. A. R. Bedar for making the text available.

daughter and gave her some instructions. Late that night, Akbar was awakened by the loud noise of someone washing clothes under his window that overlooked the Jamuna. A soldier was despatched and the culprit was brought before the king. It was a young girl. 'Why are you washing clothes at this late hour of night?' Akbar asked. 'Can't you do it during the day?' 'Your majesty,' the girl replied, 'I was busy all day long because my father gave birth to a son. Only now could I get out of the house.' 'What do you mean, your father gave birth to a son?' Akbar angrily asked. 'Who has ever heard of such a thing!' 'And who has ever heard of bulls giving milk, your majesty?' the girl responded.

Once Akbar and Birbal were enjoying a boat ride on the Jamuna when a string of pearls fell into the river from the Emperor's hand. Akbar said to Birbal, 'Birbal, *mâlâ de*, i.e. 'Get me the string of pearls,' which could also be heard as, '*mâ[n] lâ-de*,' i.e. 'Get me your mother.' Birbal promptly replied, 'Refuge of the world, *bahne do*,' i.e. 'Let it float away,' which in turn could be heard as, '*bahne[n] do*,' i.e. 'Give me your sisters.' The emperor fell silent.

Does any such joke have a reference to some event in recorded history? Only two of the jokes that I have come across.

Akbar said to Birbal, 'I have joined two months and made them into one.' Birbal replied, 'That is extremely kind of your majesty. Previously people enjoyed moonlight for only fifteen days, now they will enjoy it for thirty.'

Abdul Qadir Badayuni, who wrote what may be called the 'unauthorized' history of Akbar's reign, tells us that in 1582 Akbar ordered that 'the beginning of the reckoning of the Hindi month should be from the 28th and not from the 13th (which was the creation of Raja Bikramajit, and an innovation of his), and that they should fix the well-known festivals of the Hindus according to this rule. But it never attained currency, although farmans went forth to this effect from Futhpur to Gujrat on one side, and Bengal on the other.'<sup>4</sup>

<sup>4</sup> Abdul Qadir bin Maluk Shah, a.k.a Al-Badaoni, *Muntakhab-ut-Tawarikh*, trans. W. H. Lowe (Calcutta, 1884), II, pp. 367-8.

Akbar said to Birbal, 'Birbal, you must recite my *kalima* [lit., recite my declaration of faith; i.e. adopt my religion].' Birbal replied, 'Your majesty, I already recite your *kalima* [idiom. I am totally devoted to you], but I shall not recite the *kalima* that would ruin my religion.'<sup>5</sup>

Raja Man Singh, Akbar's nephew by marriage and perhaps his greatest general. When in an intimate gathering he was pressed by Akbar to join his circle of 'disciples,' Man Singh bluntly replied, 'If Discipleship means willingness to sacrifice one's life, I have already carried my life in my hand: what need is there of further proof? If, however, the term has another meaning and refers to Faith, I certainly am a Hindu. If you order me to do so, I will become a Musulman, but I know not of the existence of any other religion than these two.' 'At this point,' Badayuni informs us, 'the matter stopped, and the Emperor did not question him any further. . . .'<sup>6</sup>

Once I became aware of the communal tensions between Muslims and Hindus, these Akbar-Birbal jokes took on a different hue. Most of them seemed to express the contempt of a Hindu narrator for the Mughal ruler. No matter what trick the slightly foolish, slightly irrational, and generally aggressive Muslim king employed, his wily Hindu courtier always managed to come up one better. As I learned more about Akbar, particularly about his religious eclecticism, his fondness for Hindu epics, his abolition of the *jizya* and 'pilgrim' taxes levied exclusively against Hindus, his intimate ties with prominent Rajputs, and his fierce tussle for authority with Muslim religious dignitaries, the issue took on more complexity. Here was a Muslim king who had done much to remove discrimination against his non-Muslim subjects—even to the

<sup>5</sup> The last two jokes are from the 18th century manuscript mentioned above. Different versions are also found later.

<sup>6</sup> Al-Badaoni, *Muntakhab*, p. 375. Cf. also the remarks ascribed to Raja Bhagwan Das, the father of Man Singh. In the account of the year 990 AH/1582 AD, Badayuni reports: 'Raja Bhagwan Das said to the Emperor: "I would willingly believe that Hindus and Musalmans have each a bad religion, but only tell us what the new sect is, and what opinion they hold, so that I may believe." His Majesty reflected a little, and ceased to urge the Rajah.' Ibid. p. 323.



extent of antagonizing many of his co-religionists—and yet he appeared in such bad light in these stories which apparently had a communal thrust.

Ever since Freud published his book on humour and its relation to the Unconscious, it is commonplace to regard jokes as an expression of some suppressed aggressive urge. '[Jokes] make possible,' wrote Freud, 'the satisfaction of an instinct (whether lustful or hostile) in the face of an obstacle that stands in its way. They circumvent this obstacle and in that way draw pleasure from a source which the obstacle had made inaccessible.'<sup>7</sup> Should we then call these stories 'tendentious jokes'—using the classification offered by Freud—and view them as the expression of a suppressed Hindu rage against the Mughals? But then, going by popular wisdom, the more obvious target for that rage should have been Aurangzeb, not Akbar. That did not happen. Aurangzeb may have been roundly disliked, but there are extremely few jokes aimed at him.<sup>8</sup>

On the other hand, viewing jokes as an expression of suppressed aggression, the anti-Akbar sentiment of Badayuni and some later Muslim writers seems to explain a different set of similar stories, namely the exploits of Mulla Do-Piyaza, allegedly another jokester at Akbar's court. Usually the witticisms of the Mulla are directed at other people, but in several stories he is shown to get the better of both Birbal and Akbar. It may therefore be argued that the Mulla was the champion of orthodox Islam in such battles of wits. Two examples:

<sup>7</sup> Sigmund Freud, *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious* (New York, 1960), p. 101.

<sup>8</sup> I know of only eight jokes involving Aurangzeb, six of which are indeed tendentious. These are included in '*Ajā'ib-i-Hindī*' of Lala Debi Prashad (Lucknow, 1925; first published before 1895?). They depict Aurangzeb as mean-spirited, opportunistic and fanatical, and disfavouredly compare his times with the times of his predecessors—Akbar's times, predictably, being ideal. The radical difference is that they do not use any one particular person as a foil to the Emperor—Aurangzeb has no 'Birbal.' The significance of that fact will become clear below. Debi Prashad describes his book as the Urdu translation of the original in Marwari language; he prepared the translation some time before 1895.

Once the Emperor and the Mulla were walking in the garden when the Emperor broke wind. To cover his embarrassment, the Emperor looked up in the sky. The Mulla promptly pressed his stomach and squeezed out a sound; then he too looked upward. The Emperor was incensed. 'Why are you looking at the sky?' he said angrily, 'Look at me.' The Mulla replied, 'Refuge of the World, I was merely checking whose went higher.' The Emperor was terribly embarrassed.

One day a learned brahmin told the Emperor that it was an excellent omen to see two crows together at dawn. Birbal, who was present, also confirmed it. The Mulla, however, whispered in Akbar's ear, 'Your majesty ought to test it.' Akbar ordered Birbal to let him know immediately if any morning he saw two crows together. One morning, Birbal rushed in and woke the Emperor. Akbar was quite peeved, for it was a cold winter morning, but he followed him outside, only to find one lonely crow—the other had flown away. Losing his temper, he gave Birbal a few slaps. Later that day, a Rajput princess was presented to the Emperor in marriage. Then the Mulla stepped forward with folded hands and said, 'Your majesty, if you had seen those two crows you wouldn't have received this gift, for we know what he received who saw them.' Birbal was utterly shamed.

Needless to say, there are also stories in the Birbal collections which have the Mulla as the loser. In a few instances, the story is identical except for a different winner, which might suggest a similarity in intentions.

As we try to put it all together, we are faced with a rather curious figure of Akbar in these popular and anonymous tales. He seems to have an equally ugly image on both sides of a communal divide. Clearly, an explanation in terms of some suppressed religious hatred made manifest through jokes will not suffice. The matter deserves further examination.

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We begin with a closer look at the three protagonists, Akbar, Birbal, and Mulla Do-Piyaza.

Akbar was born in 1542 and died in 1605. His father was a Sunni Turk, his mother a Shi'ah Iranian, and he was born in the house of a Hindu raja with whom Humayun had taken shelter during his flight to Iran. Humayun eventually recovered his kingdom, but died shortly after in 1556. Akbar, thus, became king at the young age of thirteen years and a few months. By 1562, however, he was his own master. That year

he also received the first of his several Rajput wives (who did not convert to Islam). By 1565 he had abolished the discriminatory taxes against his Hindu subjects, but he was still a devout Muslim who said his obligatory prayers and showed respect to Muslim religious dignitaries. Over the next decade, he became increasingly more dissatisfied with the sectarian fanaticism of many of his Muslim officers; he also felt that some of them often acted against the good of the state. In 1579, he had a *mahzar* issued by a number of Muslim scholars—some of whom signed under duress—which was tantamount to a decree of the Emperor's 'infallibility.'<sup>9</sup>

Meanwhile Akbar had become curious about other religions. He brought together scholars from different traditions to discourse before him on religious topics. Eventually he put together an eclectic collection of practices to satisfy his spiritual yearnings. He began to regard himself a spiritual master and even initiated *murīds* or 'disciples.' But he didn't introduce a new religion, neither did he force any member of his court to convert. H. Blochman, who coined the term 'the Divine Faith' for Abul Fazl's 'rules for [spiritual] guidance,' could identify only 18 such 'disciples' in the works of both Badayuni and Abul Fazl.<sup>10</sup> Only one of them was a Hindu—Raja Birbal.

Birbal's original name was Mahesh Das. He was born in a Bhatt-Brahmin family in 1528 in a village near Kalpi.<sup>11</sup> He took up the profession of a poet, writing in Braj, and made a name for himself at Rajput courts. It is not clear who brought him to Akbar's attention, but by 1563 Birbal was in a position at Akbar's court to intercede on behalf of a former patron,

<sup>9</sup> The decree itself was quite in line with the orthodox position, for the authority of the king was confined to measures which had to be 'not only in accordance with some verse of the Quran, but also of real benefit to the nation.' But in practice, of course, 'it became an excuse for the exercise of unrestrained autocracy.' See S. M. Ikram, *Muslim Civilization in India* (New York, 1964), pp. 159–160.

<sup>10</sup> Abu 'L- Fazl 'Allami, *The A'in-i Akbari*, tr. H. Blochmann (Calcutta, 1927, 2nd ed.), p. 219.

<sup>11</sup> P. P. Sinha, *Raja Birbal: Life and Times* (Patna, 1980), *passim*.

the Raja of Rewa.<sup>12</sup> He is listed by Abul Fazl among those who had held the rank of a Commander of 2000, but there is no information about the rank he started from. It is, however, agreed upon that his name at the Rajput courts had been Brahma Kavi and that the new name and title came from Akbar. This is how Badayuni, no admirer of Birbal, introduces him:

The Emperor from his youth up had shown a special predilection and inclination for the society of religious sects, such as Brahmans, and musicians, and other kinds of Hindus. Accordingly at the beginning of his reign a certain Brahman musician, Gadai Brhmaindas (sic) by name, whose whole business was perpetually to praise the Hindus, and who possessed of a considerable amount of capacity and genius, came to the Court. By means of conversing with the Emperor and taking advantage of the idiosyncrasies of his disposition, he crept day by day more into favour, until he attained to high rank, and was honoured with the distinction of becoming the Emperor's confidant, and it became a case of 'Thy flesh is my flesh, and thy blood my blood.' He first received the title of Kab Rai, meaning Prince of Poets, and afterwards that of Raja Birbar meaning 'Renowned Warrior.'<sup>13</sup>

S.H. Hodivala offers an interesting explanation for the title:

The title 'Birbar,' Sans. Vira Vara, 'best warrior,' is not common and its origin or the reasons for its bestowal upon a 'begging' Bhat has not been elucidated. It may be therefore permissible to offer the suggestion that Akbar borrowed it from the *Vetala Panchavinshati* or *Baital Pachisi*, 'The Twenty Five Tales of Vampire.' In the third story of this collection, a man named Vira Vara offers his services to the King and fully earns the extraordinarily high pay allowed to him, by giving undeniable proofs of his loyalty and devotion to his master.<sup>14</sup>

<sup>12</sup> Ibid. p.39

<sup>13</sup> Al-Badaoni, *Muntakhab*, p. 164. Most Persian manuscripts of the time spell the name with an 'r' at the end; it is only later that a linguistic shift seems to affect the change from 'r' to 'l' and gives us the now familiar name, Birbal.

<sup>14</sup> S H. Hodivala, *Studies in Indo-Muslim History* (Bombay, 1939), p. 555. Muhammad Husain Azad, in an article on Birbal published in 1876, sug-

That is quite plausible. Akbar was fond of the story literature of both Iran and India. He had several Sanskrit works translated into Persian for his enjoyment. Though this particular collection is not listed among the translated books, Akbar was familiar with an earlier Persian translation of the *Katha Sarit Sagara* which includes this tale. More importantly, Akbar must have known about Raja Vikramaditya, for he unsuccessfully tried to change his calendar. He also ordered the translation of the *Sinhasan Batisi* or the *Vikramacharitra*, in which the legendary king is praised in glowing terms.<sup>15</sup> He probably also knew that his first great Hindu opponent, Hemu, had the ambition to be known as another 'Vikramaditya.'<sup>16</sup>

Evidently, Birbal received recognition from Akbar not merely as a poet but as a devoted and trustworthy companion. Viravar in the Vetala story was remarkable in two aspects: he gave away most of his enormous daily wage in charity, and when an occasion arose he willingly sacrificed his son's life to prolong the life of his master.<sup>17</sup> These qualities of generosity and devotion to his patron were also characteristic of Birbal. The Brajhasha poet Rai Hol, a contemporary of Birbal, has a *chand* in praise of Akbar and his companions; in it the special quality ascribed to Birbal is generosity.<sup>18</sup> As for Birbal's devo-

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gests that in Sanskrit Birbar meant 'Blessed by Jupiter.' This does not exclude Hodivala's interpretation. See *Maqâlât-i-Maulânâ Muhammad Husain Âzâd*, Vol. I, ed. Agha Muhammad Baqir (Lahore, 1966), p. 461.

<sup>15</sup> The translator was none other than the redoubtable Badayuni, who called his translation *Nâma-i-Kirad-Afzâ* (The Book to Increase Wisdom). Puruk'hotam, a Brahmin, wrote a commentary on it. When later the book was either lost or stolen, Akbar's displeasure fell on Badayuni. Al-Badaoni, *Muntakhab*, pp. 186, 265, 389.

<sup>16</sup> Hemu, after conquering Delhi and Agra, ascended the throne 'with the imperial canopy raised over his head, issued coins in his name, and assumed the historic name Vikramaditya or Raja Bikramajit.' See *The History and Culture of the Indian People (The Mughal Empire)*, ed. R. C. Majumdar (Bombay, 1974), p. 100.

<sup>17</sup> *Vikram and the Vampire*, trans. Richard F. Burton (London, 1893), pp. 106-117.

<sup>18</sup> Saryu Prasad Agrawal, *Akbarî Darbâr ke Hindî Kavi* (Hindi Poets at Akbar's Court) (Lucknow, 1949), p. 35.

tion to Akbar, we have already noted that he was Akbar's only Hindu *murīd*.

The Emperor was no less devoted to Birbal.<sup>19</sup> He had a special house built for Birbal close to his own chambers, an honour not bestowed on any other courtier; an equally rare honour were the four visits that the Emperor made to Birbal's various homes. On another occasion, Akbar, at the risk of his own life, saved Birbal from getting trampled by an elephant. Badayuni's immense hatred for Birbal is a vivid indication of Akbar's high regard for the latter; it was indeed a case of 'Thy flesh is my flesh, and thy blood is my blood.'

Akbar was devastated when Birbal was killed in 1586 in a disastrous campaign against the Yusufzai Afghans. He took no food or drink for two days, and ordered a court mourning. Badayuni writes, 'His Majesty cared for the death of no grandee more than for that of Bir Bar. He said, "Alas! they could not even get his body out of the pass, that it might have been burned"; but at last, he consoled himself with the thought that Bir Bar was now free and independent of all earthly fetters, and as the rays of the sun were sufficient for him, there was no necessity that he should be cleansed by fire.'<sup>20</sup>

Some months later, rumours began to circulate that Birbal had been seen alive in the northern hills. This is how Badayuni describes what followed:

When the malignant Hindus perceived that the inclination of the heart of the Emperor was fixed on that unclean one, and saw that through his loss he was in trouble and distress, every day they circulated a rumour, that people had seen him at Nagarkot, in the northern hills, in company with Jogis and Sannyasis; and that he was walking about. And His Highness believed that it was not improbable that [someone] like him, who had become detached from the attractions of the world, should have assumed the garb of a faqir, and on ac-

<sup>19</sup> In *Baitala Pachisi*, the patron of Vira Vara tried to kill himself when he discovered how his servant had sacrificed himself and his family for his sake, and was saved only by the intervention of the Devi. Raja Vikram of the story considered it as the noblest of actions, superior to all the acts of Vira Vara. *Vikram*, p. 117.

<sup>20</sup> Blochman's translation (Allami, *The A'in*, p. 214). The translation by Lowe (Al-Badaoni, *Muntakhab*, p. 362) seems incorrect.

count of shame for the misfortune he had sustained at the hands of the Yusufzais should not have returned to Court. [An officer was sent to Nagarkot] and investigated the matter, it turned out that this report was nothing but an idle tale.<sup>21</sup>

Abul Fazl and Abdul Qadir Badayuni were diametrically opposed contemporaries; the former described Birbal in respectful terms, the latter called him a 'bastard.' But neither reports anything that may be called a witticism of Birbal. In a letter written on Akbar's behalf to Abdur Rahim Khan-i-Khanan, Abul Fazl used twenty-five honorific titles before Birbal's name—the same number he used for the Khan—of these, many more refer to Birbal's spiritual excellence and his position as a confidant of the Emperor than to his superiority as a poet or a wit.<sup>22</sup>

To my knowledge, the earliest reference to Birbal as a famous wit occurs in *Ma'âsir-al-Umarâ*, an early 18th century biographical dictionary of the nobles at Mughal courts. The author, himself a grandee, reports, '[Birbal's] rising fortune brought him to [the Emperor's] court, where his poetry and wit [*sukan-sanjî va latîfa-go'î*] found him a place among the close and select companions of the king; but he gradually out-ranked them all. The Emperor often called him "my wise courtier" [*musâhib-i-dânişvar*].' Later the same author writes, 'Raja Birbar was indeed among those incomparable people of his time who were renowned for generosity and munificence. . . His verses are famous, and his witty remarks and stories

<sup>21</sup> Al Badaoni, *Muntakhab*, p. 369. Later a second rumour put Birbar in his estate at Kalinjâr. Akbar ordered for him to be brought to the court. This time a local Hindu officer deceived the Emperor by reporting to him that though Birbar had reappeared and was recognized by his barber, 'death had overtaken him before he had attained the felicity of coming to Court.' Akbar mourned for him a second time. The ever churlish Badayuni ends the account by adding, 'He [i.e. Akbar] sent for the [Hindu officer] and others, and kept them for some time in the stocks as a punishment for not having told him before; and on this pretext the Emperor got a good deal of money from him.'

<sup>22</sup> Sinha, *Raja Birbal*, Appendix, facsimile of the letter from a manuscript of *Maktûbât-i 'Allâmî* at Khudabakhsh Oriental Public Library, Patna.

[*latâ'if va nikât*] are on the lips of all and sundry.<sup>23</sup> In other words, within a hundred years of the two protagonists' deaths, Akbar-Birbal stories were well-known in North India.

Mulla Do-Piyaza is the third member of this triad. I have found no reference to him in any work from Akbar's period. (The only *do-piyâza* Abul Fazl refers to is the well-known meat dish cooked with enormous amounts of onions.) Several pamphlets on his life and jokes were published near the end of the last century; these were examined and rejected as forgeries by Hafiz Mahmood Shirani in an article published in 1939.<sup>24</sup> Shirani owned an early 19th century manuscript containing a number of miscellaneous stories, anecdotes, and letters in Persian. In it were two long pieces, allegedly written by someone named Ashlaghi [*aşlagî*], who claimed to be the Mulla's son and 'student' [*farzand va şâgird*]. According to Ashlaghi, the Mulla was born in India but left for Iran in 990 A.H. (1582 A.D.) He returned after 36 years, during the reign of Jahangir, but died shortly thereafter in 1030 A.H. (1620 A.D.) His original name was Abd-al-Momin; Do-Piyaza was an adopted name which became famous. According to several other sources mentioned by Shirani, the Mulla's grave exists in a remote place in Central India, suitably called Handiya (Cooking Pot). On the basis of this evidence, Professor Shirani concluded that the Mulla must have been a historical figure. There are several reasons, however, to believe that the evidence is to the contrary.

(1) No other information exists on Ashlaghi. Even the name is most unusual; neither *aşlag* nor *aşlagî* is found in any dictionary. The only way to make sense of the word would be to derive it from *şalaga* 'to crack open heads,' a rather rare

<sup>23</sup> Shah Nawaz Khan, *Ma'athir al-Umarâ*, ed. Abdur Rahim and Ashraf Ali (Calcutta, 1890), II, pp. 118-122.

<sup>24</sup> 'Mullâ Do-Piyâza aur Ja'far Zağallî ki Savânih-'Umri kâ Jâ'iza aur Tanqîd,' in Hafiz Mahmood Shirani, *Maqâlât-i-Şîrânî* (Lahore, n.d.), pp. 59-123. I am grateful to M. H. K. Qureshi, who made Shirani's article available. According to Beni Prashad, it originally appeared in the *Oriental College Magazine* (Lahore, November 1939). See B. Prashad, 'Raja Birbal—A Biographical Study, and an account of his articles of worship,' in *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society of Bengal*, X (1944), p. 43, fn. 5.



Arabic(?) word given in *Farhang-i-Anandrāj*. Ashlaghi might then mean: one who is most adept at cracking open heads. This speculation might not be too far-fetched given the anti-Shi'ah polemic nature of some of the anecdotes.<sup>25</sup>

(2) Ashlaghi reports that when the Mulla went to Herat in 1582, he visited the house of the poet Fasihi (d. 1632). Fasihi didn't offer him any food, making the excuse that his wife was not home. The Mulla rejoined: 'The guest desires bread, not your wife's . . .' This, in fact, is an anonymous joke recorded in an anthology of witty stories, whose author died in 1532.<sup>26</sup>

(3) Several 15th century manuscripts of the satirical and comic works of 'Ubayd-i-Zakani (14th century) contain a section titled '*Ta'rîfât-i-Mullâ Do-Piyâza*' (Mulla Do-Piyaza's Witty Definitions).<sup>27</sup>

The witty Mulla existed in Persian lore much before Akbar's time. One may, of course, argue that was exactly the reason why the man born Abdul Momin adopted the name Mulla Do-Piyaza, but it does not bring him any closer to Akbar's court. None of the jokes quoted by Shirani from Ashlaghi contains any reference to Akbar. In fact, according to Ashlaghi, the Mulla left India in dejection during Akbar's reign and did not return till 23 years after his death.

On the basis of the above, we may safely conclude that the Mulla, as opposed to Birbal, is totally fictional: a comic figure whose origins lie far back in the folklore of Iran and Central Asia and who has nothing to do with the historical Akbar.

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<sup>25</sup> Another speculation would be in the direction of connecting the name with the word for turnip, *salgam*, thus indicating a 'vegetational?' relationship between the 'father' and the 'son.'

<sup>26</sup> Shirani, 'Mulla,' p. 87. Cf. Fakhruddin Ali Safi, *Latâ'if-al-Tavâ'if*, ed. Ahmad Gulchin Ma'ani (Tehran, n.d.), p. 370.

<sup>27</sup> Paul R. Sprachman, *The Comic Works of 'Ubayd-i Zakani: A Study of Medieval Persian Bawdy, Verbal Aggression, and Satire*, unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, University of Chicago, 1981, p. 13 and passim. It is excerpts from these pithy definitions ascribable to Zakani that are included in *Ṣāhid-i-Sādiq* of Muhammad Sadiq, a compilation from Shahjahan's time. Both Shirani (above) and R. P. Tripathi in *Some Aspects of Muslim Administration* (Allahabad, 1959), p. 144, fn. 37, mistakenly take them to be by our Mulla.

What do we have now? Two comic figures, one with more basis in history than the other, but both equally legendary in reputation and *function*. They apparently entertain Akbar, sometimes engaging each other in duels of jesting and practical jokes, but more often by turning their somewhat acerbic wit on the royal patron himself. The stories of their drollery seem to gain circulation in North India at roughly the same time, i.e. after the Mughal rule in India had been firmly in place for nearly a hundred years.

Earlier it was suggested that the Mulla and Birbal could represent two opposing communal groups and express the latent hostility they separately felt against Akbar and against each other. But it was also noted that the hypothesis did not seem satisfactory. It proposed a highly antagonistic—and exclusively communal—relationship between Akbar and the Hindu masses of his and later times. Obviously it projected onto the past a great deal of later communal polarization. Secondly, it placed these entertaining stories exclusively within the context of political history and ignored their generic context. We shall now consider these two matters.

First, the question of Birbal being a symbol of an implied Hindu hatred of Akbar. To make sure I was not missing anything, I looked into the most vitriolic anti-Akbar book I could find: *Who Says Akbar Was Great?* by PENO.

Akbar . . . has often been represented as a great man and a noble king. This assessment of his personality is thoroughly unjustified. . . . All of Akbar's ancestors were barbarous and vicious. And so were his descendants . . . down the line. . . . In no way was Akbar less cruel than any of his ancestors, descendants or contemporaries. If anything his crafty, scheming and treacherous nature and the unlimited power that he wielded over a vast region qualifies him to be considered one of the foremost tyrants and sadists in world history, leave aside India's alone.<sup>28</sup>

<sup>28</sup> PENO, *Who Says Akbar Was Great?* (Delhi, 1968), pp. 1, 52, 71. PENO is a pseudonym of P. N. Oak, the author of *The Taj Mahal is a Hindu Palace* and other fascinating texts; he is also a founder of the Institute for Rewriting History.

The above quotation, made out of the first two sentences of three early chapters in a book of 25 chapters, should be enough to indicate that my choice was not wrong. Next I checked PENO's opinion of Birbal, expecting some approving comments. To my surprise I found this:

Some cheap stories of Akbar-Birbal repartees and witticisms current in India have been invented by some ingenious writer and added to from time to time by others, giving them a historical Akbar-Birbal background. The real Birbal led a horrid, precarious and deeply detested existence far removed from any humour or poetry.<sup>29</sup>

I then turned to *The History and Culture of the Indian People* published in several volumes by the Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan. Written by a galaxy of scholars, it is charged with a patriotic fervour that barely masks chauvinism. Birbal did not come out looking like a hero in it either. Described merely as a wit and a court jester, he was dismissed in a few scattered sentences.<sup>30</sup> In the context of Akbar's reign, it was Hemu, 'the forgotten Hero,' who was accorded special honour with a chapter for himself.

Changing tactics, I looked at some Hindu authors who had approvingly written about Birbal, to see if they simultaneously also offered a negative image of Akbar. That wasn't the case. The political historian who wrote a dissertation on Birbal presented Akbar as a bold and just king, who loved and trusted his wise and brave courtier.<sup>31</sup> Likewise, the literary historian who wrote about the Hindi poets at Akbar's court, glowingly praised him for patronizing such luminaries as Brahma Kavi (Birbal) and Narhari.<sup>32</sup>

<sup>29</sup> Ibid. p. 366. Cf. Badayuni's comment on the aftermath of the campaign of Nagarkot, which Akbar had given to Birbal as *jāgir*: 'So many Brahmans, sojourners in the temple, were killed, that both friends and strangers heap a thousand thousands of curses on the head of Birbal, who reckoned himself a saint among the Hindus (curse on them!).' Al-Badaoni, *Muntakhab*, p. 165.

<sup>30</sup> *The History and Culture*, pp. 137, 149, 167, 567.

<sup>31</sup> Sinha, *Raja Birbal*, passim.

<sup>32</sup> Agrawal, *Akbari*, passim.

I also examined a full length Hindi play on Birbal by a popular and prolific author, Vrindavan Lal Verma, which by 1965 had gone through six printings.<sup>33</sup> Verma views the jokes as 'expressing the wishful thinking of the common people,' but does not use them because he considers them 'inauthentic.' His play cannot claim with any greater authenticity, but significantly for our inquiry its cast of characters includes our three protagonists. The Mulla in Verma's play is predictably the butt of many jokes; he talks like a rabid Muslim, but in the end must seek Birbal's help to protect his own honour. But Akbar, despite being overly fond of women, also possesses some virtues: he is concerned about his subjects' welfare and his heart yearns for some spiritual truth. Birbal is wise and witty; he is also devoted to the cause of the common man; and he guides Akbar out of his doubts into that moment when he, Akbar, has a vision of Krishna, gives up meat and wine, reduces his harem, and orders a temple to be built in Mathura!

Clearly, for these Hindu authors, there was a certain interdependency between Akbar and Birbal. If one was 'good,' the other had to be good too. And if one was 'bad,' the other was equally bad.

A very different source for a 'Hindu' view of Akbar's rule in India is that curious book called *Bhavishya Purana*.<sup>34</sup> It is one of the established Puranas, though not a major one, and its oldest portions have variously been dated to 500-1200 A.D.<sup>35</sup> Its chief importance lies in the detailed instructions it contains concerning numerous Hindu holy days. But it also has sections on Hindu royal dynasties and, for our purpose, much comment on the Muslim presence in India. It always refers to the Muslims as either Mlecchas, Paisachas, or Daityas.

<sup>33</sup> Vrindavan Lal Verma, *Birbala* (Jhansi, 1965, 6th printing). Verma is the author of 23 novels, mostly historical, 10 story collections, 14 full-length plays, also mostly historical, and 6 collections of one-act plays. All appear to have gone through several printings.

<sup>34</sup> *Bhavishya Purana*, 2 vols., ed. Shriram Sharma Acharya, with a Hindi commentary (Bareilly, 1968). I am grateful to Arvind Sharma, who brought this book to my attention, and to Vishwajit Pandya and K. C. Bahl, who helped me read it.

<sup>35</sup> Ludo Roche, *Puranas*, vol. 2, fasc. 3 of *A History of Indian Literature*, ed. Jan Gonda (Wiesbaden, 1986), pp. 151-154.

Assorted sections contain references to Muslim kings, but Akbar is the only one after whom an entire section is named. 'Akbar Bâdsâha Varnan' consists of 97 Sanskrit verses. Perhaps partially composed a bit earlier, it must have been incorporated within the *Bhavishya Purana* some time in the eighteenth century, for the narration—in its own fashion—covers the events up to the period of Shah Alam II (d. 1806) and concludes with a description of the English.<sup>36</sup> This is how it tells the story of Akbar's birth:

Brahmachari Mukunda, who was born in the gotra of Shankaracharya, was performing tapas in Prayag with his twenty disciples. When he saw that Babur, the cruel king of the Mlecchas, had dishonoured gods, he cast his own body into fire in a havana. In order to destroy the Mlecchas, his disciples also similarly sacrificed themselves. But Mukunda had swallowed a cow's hair with the milk, consequently he was born to a Mleccha mother. . . . When the child was born, a Voice in the Sky said: 'This is a miraculous child; he holds power over destiny. Neither earlier did he follow the violent Paisacha ways, nor will he do so now. That's why, O Homayu, your son will be called Akbara. He who had twenty famous disciples, it is that Mukunda who has been born in your house.'<sup>37</sup>

The twenty disciples are also born as Akbar's contemporaries, and those who were closest come and join him. Among them is one who in the previous birth had been called Devapi; he is now born with the name Vira Bala, 'a Paschimat Brahmin [with] a boon from Vagdevi [i.e. Saraswati].' The narration continues, 'That king named Akbara ruled unchallenged, and he enjoyed his rule for fifty years. Then, together with his disciples, he went off to paradise.'<sup>38</sup> To my

<sup>36</sup> It calls the English *Gurundikas*, and connects their origin to the monkeys who had died fighting against Ravana and were then reborn and rewarded.

<sup>37</sup> *Bhavishya Purana*, II, p. 270-1.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid. p. 276. Muhammad Husain Azad in his *Darbâr-i-Akbarî*, first published in 1910, gives the story differently (Lucknow, n.d., pp. 93-4). According to Azad, some Brahmins brought to Akbar an ancient document which allegedly had been written by Mukunda Brahmachari, with prophecies about his rebirth. Then some Muslims brought an old book which

knowledge, Akbar is the only Muslim king so honoured in a pan-Indian Hindu scriptural text—a clear warning against projecting on previous centuries our contemporary communal concerns.

Next, the matter of generic context. Consider what happens when we place these jokes within the context of other humorous stories from Islamicate lands and India that involve kings and jesters. Popular literatures of these countries offer several such pairs: Harun-al-Rashid (r. 786–809) and Buhlul,<sup>39</sup> Mahmud of Ghazna (r. 998–1030) and Talhak,<sup>40</sup> and Shah Abbas (r. 1587–1629) and Enayat<sup>41</sup> on the one hand, and on the other, the Vijayanagara king, Krishnadevaraya (r. 1509–1529) and his nemesis, the brahmin Tenali Rama,<sup>42</sup> and Raja Krishnachandra of Nadiya (Bengal, 18th century) and the barber Gopal Bhar.<sup>43</sup> In each instance, we find a king whose power and magnificence verges on the fabulous for that region and time, who is paired with a jester whose wit and cunning is equally legendary. Chronologically, in the above list, Akbar would come after Krishnadevaraya but before Shah Abbas. My access to stories involving the Islamicate jesters

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suggested that Akbar was the promised Mahdi. Azad, unfortunately, does not document his sources.

<sup>39</sup> According to the *Dâ'irat-al-Ma'ârif-i-Fârsî*, Buhlul pretended to be mad and was also reputed to be related to the Caliph (Tehran, 1345/1966, I, p. 479). In *The Perfumed Garden* by Shaikh Nafzawi, there are several coarse jokes involving Buhlul with the Caliph al-Ma'mun (r. 813–833).

<sup>40</sup> *Dâ'irat-al-Ma'ârif-i-Fârsî*, I, p. 987, article '*Dalqak*,' where this word is given as a generic term for various clown figures at royal courts during the history of Iran and Islam. The author suggests that the word was perhaps derived from the name of Mahmood's jester, Talhak. He concludes that these men were not ignorant or dim-witted, and in fact used their witty or comic acts to help the people; and that they disguised as jokes what could not be expressed otherwise. Also, Fakhruddin Ali Safi, *Latâ'if*, pp. 295–96.

<sup>41</sup> *Dâ'irat-al-Ma'ârif-i-Fârsî*, I, p. 987; II, p. 2248; Muhammad Taqi Mir, *Zikr-i-Mîr*, final section, manuscript at the Riza Library, Rampur. I'm grateful to the late Akbar Ali Khan, Arshizada, for providing a copy.

<sup>42</sup> David Dean Shulman *The King and the Clown in South Indian Myth and Poetry* (Princeton, 1985), pp. 180–200.

<sup>43</sup> Tony Stewart, 'Courtly Humour and Peasant Wit in Medieval Bengal,' a paper read at the panel on 'Courtiers and Kings'; also, Edward C. Dimock, Jr., *The Thief of Love* (Chicago, 1963), pp. 183–88.

has been limited to scattered references in dictionaries and a few anthologies. Much more, however, was available for their two Indian analogues. It was, therefore, easy to discover that the joke about the pits of honey and filth was told in South India in a version involving Tenali Rama,<sup>44</sup> while the story about the brahmin in the river was narrated in Bengal with Gopal Bhar as its sharp-witted protagonist.

My lack of material on the Islamicate clowns makes it difficult to make precise comparisons, but some curious facts do suggest themselves. The Islamicate clowns take liberties with their royal patrons and can even be insulting, but they are not aggressively challenged by the kings as their Indian counterparts are. As mentioned earlier, there is in *The Arabian Nights* a story involving Harun-al-Rashid and the poet Abu Nuwas which is similar to the 'Samasya Purti' stories of Akbar and Birbal, but in both cases the challenge can be said to be a reasonable one, as opposed to the irrational challenge in, for example, the 'bull's milk' story. In a great many other stories, the Indian kings seem to go out of their way to pose irrational questions to their jesters or set them impossible tasks. They seem to hide secret doubts about the total superiority they overtly claim, and need a final victory over the jester to reach the perfection they desire. As David Shulman puts it in his illuminating discussion of Krishnadevaraya and Tenali Rama, 'Without his jester, the ruler is stuck, preyed upon by a literal reality and by his own inner falseness, a parodic counterfeit of the proper royal image that he can no longer aspire to, or even properly perceive.'<sup>45</sup> Shulman connects this tension to the fact that in the normative scheme of Hindu kingship, the brahmin priest holds legitimating and corrective powers over the Kshatriya king.

<sup>44</sup> In the Tamil version, the king tells his dream one day, then the following day Tenali Rama offers its 'continuation.' Curiously, there is also an Islamicate analog of this story dating back to early tenth century, but it is in the form of an exchange between Ash'ab, a legendary comic, and his mother! See Franz Rosenthal, *Humor in Early Islam* (Leiden, 1956), p. 64.

<sup>45</sup> Shulman, *The King*, p. 199.

This directs our attention to a second difference. In the Islamicate pairs, there is no caste distinction between the kings and the clowns. Nor do the clowns belong to any professional group that would in itself have significance for any king. In the two Indian pairs, one jester is a brahmin whose ritual role has been alluded to; the other is a barber, one of whose duties would be to keep track of the royal genealogy—another potent, legitimizing act. In other words, the Indian clowns come from those classes of people who would, in the ideal scheme of things, hold some power to legitimize the claim made by any aspiring king. In contrast, the social origins of the Islamicate jesters are not significant; in fact, they are not even mentioned. In symbolic terms, the Islamicate jesters represent the subjects of the king as a whole, and not their own particular social group within the larger body politic.

In India and in Islamicate lands, the relationship between the king and the jester as delineated in these popular tales is organic and fundamental. 'The folk perception of a mighty king,' writes Shulman, 'requires the presence of his irrepressible jester. Whatever the king constructs—together with his ministers, his wives, his Brahmin priests and advisers, his poets—the jester can be counted on to undermine or unravel. The two constitute the two contrary vectors of a single process of life and movement.'<sup>46</sup> He proposes that 'the king is felt to be in need of the jester's *corrective* power.'<sup>47</sup> To which we can add that, in the Indian stories, the king may also be seen as needing the *legitimizing* power the jester possesses by virtue of belonging to a particular social group.

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James Ryan in a brief paper presented at a conference took the 'bull's milk' story and, putting it within the context of world folklore, traced it through the Jatakas, a Sri Lankan version, and a story cycle in the Philippines. He concluded, 'There are human universals of humour and thought which occur everywhere in the world. Myth and folklore exhibit this trait again and again. If there is no discernible pattern to

<sup>46</sup> Ibid. p. 195, emphasis original.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid. p. 197, emphasis added.



variations on the themes of the Birbal stories, it is because they play upon universals which are simply inserted into different backdrops as the situation requires. What is significant is that they are arrayed around the relationship of Birbal and Akbar like filings around a magnet.<sup>48</sup> The last sentence suggests an important question, perhaps the most important: why did these 'universals of humour' get arrayed around Akbar and Birbal? In other words, why Akbar, and not Firoz Tughluq or Aurangzeb? Why Birbal, and not Man Singh or Todarmal? And why Mulla Do-Piyaza?

Akbar received this privileged status from posterity because, in both deed and word, he had been the most dominant of all Muslim rulers of India. How uniquely powerful his image was in his own time can be gauged from this account of his death in the autobiography of a Jain trader of Jaunpur:

In Vikram 1662, during the month of Kartik, after the monsoon was over, the great emperor Akbar (*chhatrapati akbar sahi jalal*) breathed his last in Agra. The alarming news of his death spread fast and soon reached Jaunpur. People felt suddenly orphaned and insecure without their sire. Terror raged everywhere; the hearts of men trembled with dire apprehension; their faces became drained of colour. I was sitting up a flight of stairs in my house when I heard the dreadful news, which came as a sharp and sudden blow. It made me shake with violent, uncontrollable agitation. I reeled and losing my balance, fell down stairs in a faint. . . . The whole town was in a tremor. Everyone closed the doors of his house in panic; shop-keepers shut down their shops. Feverishly, the rich hid their jewels and costly attire underground; many of them quickly dumped their wealth and their ready capital on carriages and rushed to safe, secluded places. Every householder began stocking his home with weapons and arms. Rich men took to wearing thick, rough clothes such as are worn by the poor, in order to conceal their status, and walked the streets covered in harsh woollen blankets or coarse cotton wrappers. Women shunned finery, dressing in shabby, lustreless clothes. None could tell the status of a man from his dress and it became impossible to distinguish the rich from the poor. There were manifest signs of panic everywhere although there was no reason for it since there were

<sup>48</sup> James Ryan, 'The Birbal Tales in Broader Perspective,' a paper read at the panel on 'Courtiers and Kings.'

really no thieves or robbers about. The commotion subsided after ten days. . . .<sup>49</sup>

In marked contrast, the author barely mentioned the event when Jahangir died. There was no panic it was not as if an age had ended, or a miraculous lord had passed away.

If Akbar's inclusion in the *Bhavishya Purana*, in the guise of a reborn Vaishnavite ascetic, was a form of apotheosis in popular religious literature, then his selection as the royal protagonist in these anonymous jokes was also a form of apotheosis—within secular, popular literature. The Akbar-Birbal jokes are indeed 'tendentious,' but their purpose is more to integrate and humanize—implicitly, even glorify—Akbar, than to direct some suppressed communal antagonism towards him. Their generic function requires that they cluster around someone who inspired in the masses awe and reverence, not contempt or hate. No doubt they also have a subversive aim, but through the agency of laughter they merely humanize what pretends to be super-human, not dehumanize it into a demon. Akbar remains a 'great' king; Birbal his 'great' companion.

Birbal was chosen to be the other protagonist, not so much because he was a poet, but because he was a Brahmin. He thus fitted the Indian symbolic type for these stories more closely than did either of the other two prominent Hindus at Akbar's court: Todar Mal, a Khattri, and Man Singh, a Rajput. In Akbar and Birbal of these stories we have the counterparts of Krishnadevaraya and Tenali Rama, who in their turn represented the ideal of Hindu polity: a powerful kshattriya king with an equally powerful brahmin advisor. 'Together, these two figures appear to delimit the field of politics; they comprise the minimal basis for statehood in classical theory, and this theory clearly recognizes their mutual dependence: there are no Kshattriyas without Brahmins, and vice versa.'<sup>50</sup>

Turning to the Mulla, we note that, in the Islamicate model, the clown had no inherent, socially granted power or role. He

<sup>49</sup> Banarasidasa (1586-1641?), *Ardhakathanaka*, translated and annotated by Mukund Lath (Jaipur, 1981), p. 38.

<sup>50</sup> Shulman, *The King*, p. 95.

functioned only within the symbolic structure of these stories, and there primarily to offer back to his patron, mirror like, his image slightly distorted. To that extent he was an equalizing agent: he forced the king to recognize his human imperfections. In that respect Mulla Do-Piyaza and Birbal are alike. But the Mulla could also be a champion of his patron's cause. There are several stories where he defends the honour of Akbar and India against Iranian challenges. In the Ashlaghi manuscript where the Mulla goes off to Iran, a few anecdotes quoted by Prof. Shirani show that the Mulla never sold himself short or his Sunni sect. It could be that the Mulla first appeared in jokes that reflected rivalries between various Muslim religious or racial groups within India, which rivalries were more successfully curbed by Akbar than any other king. Gradually, as the posthumous image of Akbar became magnified in popular mind, the Mulla was assigned a place in his legendary court. The next steps, naturally, were for him to become a rival of Birbal and then a 'champion of Islam' *vis-à-vis* both Birbal and Akbar. His symbolic character contained all these possibilities.

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Anonymous popular tales and other folklore can contribute to our understanding of political history, so long as we do not view them essentially as a kind of commentary on it. Folktales are themselves history of a sort. And they are not just artefacts, but also processes aiming at quite varied effects within different traditions and contexts. As processes, these amusing stories can be said to be as much politically affirmative as subversive. D. M. Goldman, the Russian translator of Birbal stories, concluded that they project a 'social utopia' and embody 'the optimism of the people in their darkest hour.'<sup>51</sup> But, since there are no 'dark times' as such in these stories, one can also argue that for their tellers a

<sup>51</sup> D. M. Goldman and V. V. Tsvetkova, ['The Amusing Stories About the Supremely Wise and Clever Birbal'] (Moscow, 1978), Introduction. Other comments: 'These stories strengthen the people's faith in their own power. . . Akbar is there only for contrast, in order to show that the real power lay with the people. . . . Virtue and Justice are personified in Birbal.' I am grateful to Colin P. Masica for translating relevant passages.

'utopia' had existed in an earlier time, in contrast to the less glorious times that followed. On the other hand, an Akbar-Birbal joke may be used to signify 'Hindu' subversion of 'Muslim' power.<sup>52</sup> After all, how can anyone prove that the first time someone linked one of these floating jokes with Akbar, it was not out of a dislike for the Mughal(s) or the Muslims? We must not forget that when the *Bhavishya Purana* raised Akbar to its pinnacle of approval, it simultaneously cast the rest of the Muslims into the lowest depths of its detestation. No, Freud's insight cannot be totally denied. One can only counter, it is not the whole truth either. Jokes not only make us laugh, they can also make us cry. And though the words might be identical, laughing *with* someone and laughing *at* someone are totally different acts in intention. Perhaps the only safe conclusion would be not to view these jokes too closely in the perspective of our contemporary concerns or lose sight of their diverse generic identities. A failure to do so would keep us tied to our preconceptions and preclude any discovery of their multiple contexts.

As artefacts, however, these anonymous jokes are as visible and valuable an indicator of Akbar's impact on Indian history as are the ruins of his four forts, the chronicles written by his historians, and the miniatures painted by his artists. They enormously add to the stature of their royal protagonist. For, if the favourable comments of the *Bhavishya Purana* make Akbar unique among the Muslim kings of India, his being apotheosized in the universe of folklore by being linked with, not one, but two jesters makes him unique among all the monarchs of the subcontinent, perhaps also of the world.

<sup>52</sup> Cf. Lee Siegal, *Laughing Matters: Comic Tradition in India* (Chicago, 1987), pp. 297–312. Recently, I am told, Sadhvi Rithambra also used some Akbar-Birbal jokes in one of her denouncements of Indian Muslims, innocently unaware of what PENO thought of them.

# Ghalib's Delhi: A Shamelessly Revisionist Look At Two Popular Metaphors\*

*(for Ralph Russell)*

Mirza Asadullah Beg, better known by his *takallus*, Ghalib, was born in Agra in 1797 in a family of soldiers of fortune. His grandfather, Mirza Qauqan Beg, had come from Transoxiana to Delhi in the second half of the 18th century and obtained a minor rank in the army of Shah Alam II. Ghalib's father, Mirza Abdullah Beg, first soldiered for the Navab of Avadh, then for the Nizam of Hyderabad, and was seeking service with the Raja of Alwar when he was killed in a skirmish in 1802. Ghalib's uncle, Mirza Nasrullah Beg, served the Marathas as the subedar at Agra, but he also developed such useful contacts with the British that Lord Lake, after his conquests of Delhi and Agra in 1803, made him a *risâldar* of 400 cavalrymen and also awarded him a *jâgîr* for life worth more than one hundred thousand rupees. Nasrullah Beg, however, died in 1805 in an accident. Ghalib was then raised by his maternal relatives who had soldiered for the British. In 1810, at the age of thirteen, he was married to an eleven year old, distant relative in Delhi, and soon after moved there, first to live with her family and later on his own. Except for a few short trips to Rampur and an extended absence of almost three years, when he went to Calcutta via Lucknow and

\* Revised. Originally presented at the conference, 'Urdu Scholarship in Transnational Perspective,' at Columbia University, New York, September 28-30, 2001.

Benares, Ghalib remained in Delhi until his death on February 15, 1869.

Urdu literary historiography in the twentieth century has often tended to refer to Ghalib as the last true representative of the 'Mughal' intellectual and literary traditions and the Delhi of his experience as a 'Mughal' city, briefly resplendent in its old glory before it was destroyed or permanently changed by the British in the aftermath of the Indian Revolt of 1857. With reference to Ghalib's Delhi, it has also been a common habit of our literary historians to employ two particular metaphors in developing their descriptive and analytical statements. According to them, Ghalib's Delhi was a Mughal garden undergoing its final 'spring' before the 'autumn' of the Revolt's aftermath destroyed it forever, or that it was a Mughal candle that sort of naturally flared into its old brilliance before going out for good. This paper takes a closer look at these two metaphors and their ramifications. It, however, claims only an originality of emphasis as indicated in the title, for what it owes to so many scholars will soon become clear.

Altaf Husain Hali (1837-1914), the first chronicler of Ghalib's life, prefaced his book, *Yâdgâr-i-Ghalib* (1897) by evoking a memory of his own first visit to Delhi:

In the thirteenth century of the Muslim era when the decline of the Muslims had already entered its nadir, when along with their wealth, renown and political power there had also departed from them their greatness in arts and sciences, there gathered in Delhi, by some great good fortune, a band of men so talented that their assemblies recalled the days of Akbar and Shahjahan. . . . When I first arrived in Delhi autumn had already come to this garden: some of these men had left Delhi while others had departed from this world. Still, among those who had remained, there were many I shall always be proud of having seen— men whose likes the soil of Delhi, nay of all India, will never produce again. For the mould in which they were cast has changed, and the breezes among which they flourished and flowered have veered away. . . .<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Ralph Russell & Khurshidul Islam, *Ghalib: Life and Letters* (London, 1969), p. 30. In the original, Hali concludes the description by tellingly quoting a Persian verse: 'Time has now laid down a very different

Hali, a native of Panipat, first came to Delhi around 1855 when he was in his late teens, but then stayed less than two years. He, in fact, was not in Delhi but in Hissar when the Revolt broke out in 1857. It, therefore, is interesting to note that in Hali's opinion 'autumn had already come' to the garden that recalled for him the days of the Grand Mughals. He also ascribes the preceding 'spring' to some stroke of good fortune—lit., 'some happy conjunction' [*husn-i ittifâq*]<sup>1</sup>—rather than to any human cause. Hali's metaphor of a garden suggests an entity with some continuous identity—in this case, Mughal—and a cyclical change: a spring, followed by an autumn, to be followed in turn, one may presume, by another spring. In other words, a metaphor no different from the one that he used in his most influential poetic work, the *musaddas* 'The Tide and Ebb of Islam'—a tide of Islamic glory, followed by a tragic ebb, to be followed, Hali hoped and prayed for, by another tide. But in the case of the Delhi he experienced before 1857 and which alone he identified with Ghalib, Hali apparently perceived no possibility of revival, and made clear his belief by adding the final sentence: 'the breezes among which they flourished and flowered have veered away.' Many of the twentieth century Muslim/Urdu intelligentsia, in accord with their own self-perception as a community in socio-political decline and influenced by Indian and Muslim nationalisms, have followed suit, often invoking with reference to Ghalib's times the motif of the last spring in the garden of a supposed Mughal glory.

A later, but equally popular, literary work provided our literary historians the second, and more frequently invoked, metaphor. Written by Mirza Farhatullah Beg (1884–1947), it is a fictional account of a musha'irah of Urdu poets in Delhi in 1845. Originally titled *Dillî kâ Ek Yâdgâr Musâ'ira, 1261 Hijrî* (A Musha'irah in Delhi in 1261 A.H.), it is now commonly known—even published—as *Dillî kî Âkîrî Şam* (The Last Candle of Delhi). In his prefatory remarks, Beg wrote: 'It is customary for a sick man to recover,

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foundation. The bird that laid golden eggs is no more.' The idea for this essay possibly first came to me while reading the above section in that excellent book.

momentarily, before the final stroke of death overtakes him. In the case of Urdu poets the age of the Mughal Emperor Bahadur Shah II was such a momentary recovery before the final extinction. . . . In [his] ruined and desolate city were collected not only poets, but such a host of other talented men that it would be difficult to find their counterparts in the whole of India, nay in the whole world!'<sup>2</sup> Beg's literary *tour de force* ends with a scene in which the two candles that had earlier circulated among the poets are formally blown out and a herald proclaims that 'the last musha'irah of Delhi has come to an end.' The 'last musha'irah' became in popular mind the 'last candle'—a name reportedly given to the book by Khvaja Hasan Nizami, a prolific and highly popular writer in the early decades of the last century. It happened perhaps because the new image shared an attribute with the 'sick man' image invoked by Beg, namely that a candle or lamp too, before it finally goes out, flares up, as if in a revival, and casts a brief but brilliant light all around it.

The 'candle' metaphor, however, was first invoked and made popular by Maulavi Zakaullah, a major contemporary of Sir Syed, and an influential teacher and writer whose textbooks on History and Arithmetic were extensively used in North Indian schools in the nineteenth century. In his *Târîk-i-Islâmiyân-i-Hind*, Zakaullah wrote, 'It is the rule that when a lamp is about to go out its wick/flame suddenly flares up. In a similar manner, when the lamp of the Timurid rule was about to go out it gave out so much light and was so revived that it is difficult to find another incident like it.'<sup>3</sup> We must note that what was for Zakaullah 'the lamp of the Timurid rule' became for Nizami and others 'the candle of Delhi,' in fact 'the last and final candle of Delhi.'

The altered image of a last remaining candle about to go out was not only unambiguous in evoking a finality and doom, it simultaneously implied very strongly that life in the Delhi of the first half of the nineteenth century was not radically

<sup>2</sup> Akhtar Qamber, *The Last Musha'irah of Dehli* (New Delhi: Orient Longman, 1979), p. 36.

<sup>3</sup> (vol. 10, p. 360) quoted in Tanvir Ahmad Alavi, *Zauq: Savânih aur Intiqâd* (Lahore, 1963), p. 10.)



different from the days of the great Mughals, that it was illumined not by anything new but only by the last remaining candle of the multitude that had burned bright in the preceding three centuries, and that a radical and wide-ranging change took place only after the Revolt of 1857. The prevalence of this powerful view can be seen in the writings of such popular and prolific writers of the Thirties as Rashidul Khairi who wrote *Naubat-i-Panj Roza* or *Dillī kī Akīrī Bahār* (The Five Day Glory, or Delhi's Final Spring), Khvaja Muhammad Shafī' who wrote *Dillī kā Sanbhālā* (The Last Recovery of Delhi), and Khvaja Hasan Nizami who devoted several short books to this theme, besides any number of their imitators of that time and subsequent who celebrated the final days of the Mughal dynasty in Delhi as the swan song of a pristine Muslim/Mughal culture in India. With the rise of Nationalism in India there developed in the public mind not only a tragic and valiant image of the last occupant of the Red Fort but also a belief that his court actually mattered in the greatly alive social and intellectual life in Delhi preceding the Revolt of 1857, and that only the Revolt's failure brought an end to that way of life and thought and its regal source.<sup>4</sup>

The power and persistence of these two metaphors can perhaps be best illustrated by the fact the even a careful scholar like Shaikh Muhammad Ikram, writing in the late Forties, casually used both within just three lines to describe the Delhi that Syed Ahmad Khan experienced between 1846 and 1855.

He [Syed Ahmad Khan] saw the final spring of Shahjahanabad. . . . The Delhi of the Mughals was at the time like a lamp at dawn, but [as the poet has said,] '*bharaktā hai carāg-i-subh jab kāmōḥ hotā hai*' [The lamp still burning at dawn flares up before it goes out].<sup>5</sup>

'Delhi has been the most glorious—and also the most unfortunate—of all the cities of India,' so noted Muhammad

<sup>4</sup> Tellingly perhaps, one does not find such claims of cultural authority being made about Bahadur Shah's predecessor, his father Akbar Shah II.

<sup>5</sup> Muhammad Ikram, *Mauj-i-Kausar* (Delhi, n.d., reprint of the 2nd edition), p. 80.

Habib, the doyen of modern Muslim historiography in South Asia.<sup>6</sup> Aurangzeb, the last of the 'Great' Mughals, died in 1707. Delhi then was an imperial capital, with a population of close to two million people spread over its various 'cities.' 'It was the largest and most renowned city,' writes Percival Spear, 'not only of India, but of all the East from Constantinople to Canton. Its court was brilliant, its mosques and colleges numerous, and its literary and artistic fame as high as its political renown.'<sup>7</sup> By 1803, when the British took control of the city from the Marathas, its citizens had been plundered and massacred several times, only one or two of its ten successive Emperors had escaped being murdered or blinded, and its status had shrunk to that of a provincial capital of less than two hundred thousand people.<sup>8</sup> In the five score years of the eighteenth century, Delhi, indeed the entire North India, had suffered a sea change.

It would, of course, be false to view the eighteenth century as entirely a period of decline and despair for all of India, or even only for North India. As we well know, during that same century several regional political and cultural entities strongly asserted themselves; Delhi's tragic times helped to bring about the glory days of the Deccan, Maharashtra, Bengal and Avadh. Yet the human tragedy of Delhi in the second half of the eighteenth century was indeed immense. The wars between the Turani and Irani factions, the cataclysmic invasion by Nadir Shah, the repeated scourges of the Afghans, the Marathas, the Ruhilas and the Jats—they all took heavy tolls in human lives and also forced much emigration from Delhi and its environs. Then there was the great famine of 1782 in which, according to some estimates, nearly one-third of the rural population of the territory around Delhi starved to death. A relative peace returned to Delhi after some sixty years of despair only in the final decade of the century under the authority of Mahadji Sindhia and his Maratha forces. However, when the British took Delhi they found that 'it had

<sup>6</sup> Muhammad Habib, 'Preface' in *Ṣāh Valiullāh Ke Siyāsī Maktūbāt*, ed. Khaliq Ahmad Nizami (Lahore, 1978), p. 13.

<sup>7</sup> Percival Spear, *Twilight of the Mughals* (Delhi, 1969, reprint), p. 1.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.* p. 1.

been divided into spheres of control by neighbouring Gujar tribes for purposes of plunder.<sup>9</sup>

Lord Lake's army defeated the Maratha troops outside Delhi in September 1803. A few weeks later, Lord Wellesley wrote to Shah Alam and described the victory as 'the happy instrument of your Majesty's restoration to a stage of dignity and tranquillity under the power of the British crown.'<sup>10</sup> The British were now the master of the Mughal and also his protector, but they had no intention of allowing him again any semblance of over lordship. In that regard they were quite different from the Marathas and others before them. Maratha generals, for example, had wielded actual authority in that region for almost thirty years but had claimed merely to be the Regent or Deputy Regent of the Emperor.

The replacement of the Marathas by the British did not alter the actual state of Shah Alam's authority. The popular anonymous verse, 'The "King of the World," Shah Alam, / Rules all the way from Delhi to Palam,' would have been a gross exaggeration even if it had actually referred to him, for the ruling powers of the Mughal Emperor had for quite some time been limited to the walls of his citadel, the Red Fort.<sup>11</sup> Financially, however, he was now better off. 'The King's [annual] allowance had at first been fixed at thirteen *lakhs* [1.3 million rupees] by Sind[h]ia in 1789, but it had dwindled in later years until his personal allowance was no more than Rs. 17,000 per month, while the whole allowance for the royal household, including the palace guards, was not more than Rs. 45,000 per month. In place of this Shah Alam's personal allowance was fixed [by Wellesley] at Rs. 60,000 per

<sup>9</sup> Narayani Gupta, *Delhi Between Two Empires* (Delhi, 1981), p. 10.

<sup>10</sup> Spear, *Twilight*, p. 36. Shah Alam, of course, had an earlier experience of British protection and financial support at Allahabad (1764-1771), after the defeat at Buxar.

<sup>11</sup> '*Saltanat-i-Şâh-i-Âlam // Az Dillî tâ Pâlam*. This anonymous verse, now generally assumed to refer to the 18th century Mughal king, goes back, in fact, a couple of more centuries. In its original form, '*Bâdsâhî-i-Âlam // Az Dihlî tâ Pâlam*,' it referred to Alam Shah, the last of the Sayyid kings of Delhi. See Abdullah, *Târîk-i-Dâ'udî*, ed. Sh. Abdur Rashid (Aligarh, 1969), p. 7.

month, and the whole grant at eleven and a half *lakhs* a year.<sup>12</sup> Shah Alam was an old and frugal man: when he died in 1806 he had accumulated five *lakhs* in the royal treasury. But his successors had more expenses to take care of, primarily because now, under *Pax Britannica*, they had many more dependents to support. When Bahadur Shah II came to the throne in 1837, there were roughly 800 *salâtîn* or royal descendants dependent on him; by 1848, this number had increased to around 2,100. The British, however, never gave the Mughal more than Rs. 12 *lakhs* [1.2 million] in any given year.

We may briefly note here an interesting parallel. Ghalib's uncle had been given a substantial *jâgîr* by the British, which they took back when he died only a year later. Small pensions, however, were arranged for his dependants—Ghalib's share being Rs. 62 and 8 annas per month. As Peter Hardy has aptly put it, '[Ghalib] accepted without difficulty that the British owed him a living as a young relative of Muslim collaborators with the British, collaborators who had acted as sincere partners and allies, albeit junior, in a common enterprise, men who were neither sycophants nor time-servers.'<sup>13</sup> Ghalib received that amount in full only until 1827; after 1827, thanks mainly to the antagonism of his own relatives, he had to struggle hard to get his due share. He went to Calcutta, petitioned the Governor General and the Queen, and would have carried his case to England if he had had the means.

Shah Alam's successor, Akbar Shah II, also sought to obtain what he thought was his just due. In 1827 he petitioned the Directors of the East India Company and managed to get his allowance increased to Rs. 15 lacs, but 'the increase was never actually paid at all.'<sup>14</sup> After Akbar Shah's death in 1837, his son Bahadur Shah II, who owed his accession to the throne entirely to the British invention of a false Mughal tradition of primogeniture—Akbar Shah had preferred a younger son, and the Mughal throne had always been fought over and won

<sup>12</sup> Spear, *Twilight*, p. 38.

<sup>13</sup> Peter Hardy, 'Ghalib and the British,' in *Ghalib: The Poet and his Age*, ed. Ralph Russell (New York, 1972), pp. 56–57.

<sup>14</sup> Spear, *Twilight*, p. 38.

through bloodshed—tried several times to negotiate an increase, but always in vain. Neither Ghalib nor the Mughal emperor was any match to the formidable intricacies of the British bureaucracy. The system of administration and authority that assured the two their security and regular income, also made it impossible for them to receive with grace what they believed was theirs by right as well as promise. It also placed the king and the commoner on an unprecedented equal footing.

As already mentioned, Ghalib grew up in Agra but had moved to Delhi by the time he was fifteen. He thus lived all his life knowing no temporal authority other than the British. He also watched Delhi gradually gain in prosperity and population, and saw the walled city and its un-walled sprawl become more secure, '[under] the judicial powers of the Resident, fortified by the contingents of the army in and near the city, [protecting it] from raids by the Gujars and Mewatis.'<sup>15</sup> In 1821, the British restored the old city canal—originally built in the 14th century by Firoz Tughlaq and repaired and enlarged by Shahjahan in the 17th—that had been in disrepair and clogged with sand since the 1750s. When water was directed into the channel that fed the canal in the Chandni Chowk, the people 'greeted the flowing water with offerings of ghee and flowers.'<sup>16</sup> Ghalib must have also seen the immediate environs of Delhi turn lush and green as old gardens were repaired and new ones planted.

More importantly, Ghalib witnessed something that had not taken place in Delhi for centuries: peaceful transfers of authority, not just in the Fort involving puppet kings, but also in the British administration that wielded enormous visible power. In 1829, Edward Colebrooke, Resident at Delhi, was first suspended then later dismissed from service on charges of corruption. It must have amazed the people of Delhi to see their virtual king removed without any breakdown of authority. In 1853, when the incumbent Lt. Governor passed

<sup>15</sup> Gupta, *Delhi*, p. 11.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid. p. 19. Gupta adds, 'But the farmers in Delhi Territory used up so much of it that the quantity flowing into the city decreased and the Canal finally dried up again [in the eighteen-forties].'

away, Ghalib wrote to his friend, Munshi Nabi Bakhsh Haqir, 'The Lt. Governor died in Bareilly. Let's see who is appointed in his place. Just see how [good] the administration of these people is. What tumult [*inqilâb*] wouldn't have occurred if any similar high ranking person of Hindustan had passed away? But here no one shows even the slightest concern as to what happened and who died.'<sup>17</sup> No wonder then that Ghalib, in the Persian poem that he wrote in 1855 for Syed Ahmad Khan's edition of Abul Fazl's *Â'in-i-Akbarî* and that Syed Ahmad Khan did not include, not only praised such Western inventions as the telegraph and the steam engine, but also declared that the law of the realm [*â'in*] that existed in his own time had not been seen before, and that it had made all preceding *â'ins* as useless as old almanacs! He closed the poem by resoundingly declaring: 'It's not virtuous to nurture and cherish the dead' [*murda parvardan mubâarak kâr nîst*],<sup>18</sup> a sentiment also echoed in one of his best-known Persian couplets: '*bâ man miyâvîz ai pidar, farzand-i-âzar râ nigar // har kas ki şud sâhib-nazar dîn-i-buzurgân kuş na-kard*' (Don't quarrel with me, father; look at Azar's son Abraham. For he who gains a discerning eye doesn't favour his ancestors' faith).

Ghalib, of course, was a descendent of mercenary soldiers and belonged to the current urban aristocracy; he did not know how excessive taxes and rigid tenancy regulations introduced by the British had set in process the ruination of the peasantry in Delhi territory.<sup>19</sup> Nor was he much aware of the fact that procedural equality between the Europeans and the Indians was limited to civil cases, and that the Europeans were considered superior to Indians under the criminal law.<sup>20</sup>

<sup>17</sup> Ghalib, *Kutûb-i-Ghalib*, ed. Malik Ram (Aligarh, 1962), p. 132.

<sup>18</sup> Text in Waris Kirmani, *Evaluation of Ghalib's Persian Poetry* (Aligarh, 1972), pp. 72-74.

<sup>19</sup> Spear, *Twilight*, p. 108 ff.

<sup>20</sup> Aziz Ahmad, *Islamic Modernism in India and Pakistan 1857-1964* (London, 1967), p. 16. Needless to say, Ghalib has no word of praise for the new law and order in the verses and comments on his own confinement for three months on charges of running a gambling den.

Turning to the matter of the cultural and religious life of Delhi during the first half of the nineteenth century, we should note that the presence of the Emperor was felt in the city only on those occasions that involved some public pomp and display. The Emperor's elephants paraded through the city in festive processions, and ceremonial durbars were regularly held in the Red Fort. It is also true that the people of the pre-Revolt Delhi did not imitate the British in dress, food, and social behaviour, and no doubt the etiquette of the royal court was emulated in all elite assemblies in the city, as it was in many similar gatherings all over India. But at no time was the Emperor in any sense an arbiter of the elite's taste and behaviour. Similarly, the Emperor regularly took part in the two annual Eid gatherings in the Jama Masjid, and his name was mentioned in the Friday *kutbas* in Delhi as well as elsewhere. His symbolic position as the champion of the Sunni faith also remained important, to the extent that Bahadur Shah II had to conceal his own Shi'ite leanings.<sup>21</sup> The Emperor also patronised Hindu festivals and religious processions. But that is all that we can claim concerning the Mughal Emperor's significance in the religious life of the people of Delhi.

There was, on the other hand, a major new development in the religious life of Delhi during the first half of the nineteenth century, and that was the establishment of a Christian presence within the walled city and an expansion of Christian missionary work. Though the skyline of Delhi was still dominated by the domes and minarets of the Jama Masjid, there was now another prominent enough building not too far from it, namely St. James's Church, built inside the city by Col. James Skinner and consecrated in 1836. There were also instances of conversion, including at least three major cases, those of (1) Dr. Chimman Lal, who was in the British medical service and attended upon the Emperor too; (2) 'Master' Ram Chandra, a mathematician, who was a highly respected and popular teacher at Delhi College; and (3) Maulavi Imaduddin,

<sup>21</sup> In fact, on one occasion, Bahadur Shah sought Ghalib's help for exactly that purpose, and Ghalib, staunchly a Shi'ah in his own beliefs, came to his patron's rescue.

who came to be known as *Pâdrî* Imaduddin and was later a most active Christian polemicist. According to Percival Spear, both Chimman Lal and Ram Chandra, who received baptism together in July 1852, 'were first attracted to Christianity as something more than an intellectual creed by the services in St. James's Church.'<sup>22</sup> According to some scholars, at least Nazir Ahmad, the well-known novelist and translator, if not also Zakaullah, the first modern Muslim historian, came close to converting to Christianity, the religion chosen by their beloved teacher 'Master' Ram Chandra.<sup>23</sup> Though the full effects of the missions were felt much later when the entire North India saw heated polemics and public debates between Christian clerics and Muslim '*ulamâ*', it may be more than a mere speculation on the part of Prof. Annemarie Schimmel that the first Urdu translations of the Qur'an by the two younger sons of Shah Waliullah could have been in response to the translation activities of the Christian missionaries.<sup>24</sup>

While the people of pre-Revolt Delhi did not imitate the British table manners and social behaviour, many of them were quite enthusiastic about Western science. The city did

<sup>22</sup> Spear, *Twilight*, p. 144. Also, Sadiqur Rahman Kidwai, *Mâstar Râm Chandra* (Delhi, 1961) p. 41, based on Ram Chandra's own statement in the preface to his magnum opus, *A Treatise on the Problems of Maxima and Minima* (London, 1859).

<sup>23</sup> Kidwai, *Mâstar*, p. 49; C. F. Andrews, *Zaka Ullah of Dehli* (Lahore, 1976, reprint), p. 68. One should also note the presence of several very positive Christian missionary figures in a number of Nazir Ahmad's novels. Ghalib, incidentally, is not reported to have had any dealings with Christian missionaries.

<sup>24</sup> Annemarie Schimmel, *Classical Urdu Literature From the Beginning to Iqbal*, (Wiesbaden, 1975), p. 205. Shah Rafiuddin's translation was completed in 1786, while the more popular translation by Shah Abdul Qadir was finished in 1792. S. A. A. Rizvi, in *Shah 'Abd Al-'Aziz: Puritanism, Sectarian Polemics and Jihad* (Canberra, 1982), disagrees with Schimmel, arguing that the translations were done earlier than any known spread of the missionaries' work and tracts in the Delhi territory (p. 104). Shah Waliullah's own Persian translation of the Qur'an, perhaps the first in South Asia, was due to his own independent desire to have ordinary literate Muslims of his time directly engage with their scripture, and similar could have been the desire later of his sons too. The issue deserves further exploration.



not lack in *madrasas* where traditional Islamic learning was available, but none gained the status and fame that accrued to the one which eventually came to be known as Delhi College. In 1825, the East India Company took over an existing *madrasa* which, in 1824, had only nine students and just one teacher.<sup>25</sup> The new institution began with a staff of several Indian teachers and an English principal, but with a monthly budget of only Rs. 500. It received a major boost when, a couple of years later, the Prime Minister of the King of Avadh left it a bequest of Rs. 170,000. At first the College had classes only in 'Oriental' languages but in 1828 an English section was also opened which, within three years, could boast of 300 students. What was most significant about this institution was that it taught Western sciences to *all* its students, and that too through the medium of Urdu. Complementing the College's work were the efforts of the Delhi Vernacular Translation Society which did an outstanding job of getting scholarly books translated into Urdu from Arabic, Persian and English for use at the College. Maulavi Abdul Haq, in his book on Delhi College, has given a list of some 128 books—original works as well as translations—that the Society published, including books on Geometry, Algebra, Astronomy, Physics, Chemistry, Calculus, Geography, History and Mechanics, translated by the teachers and former students of the College. By 1855, Delhi College had a total of 350 students; of these, 217 were in the English language section, while the three 'Oriental' languages, Persian, Arabic and Sanskrit, had 77, 33 and 23 students, respectively.<sup>26</sup>

Some sense of that heady time for the then young of age can be had from two quotations from C. F. Andrews' chapter on 'The New Learning' in his book on Zakauallah. He quotes from 'Master' Ram Chandra's memoirs as follows: 'The doctrines of ancient philosophy taught through the medium of

<sup>25</sup> Abdul Haq, *Marhûm Dillî Kâlij* (Delhi, 1945). All comments concerning Delhi College are based on the information provided by Maulavi Abdul Haq. One should remember that similar institutions were also started at Agra and Benares, though detailed information about them has not been put together yet.

<sup>26</sup> By religion, 243 Hindus, 97 Muslims, and 10 Christians.

Arabic were thus cast in the shade before the more reasonable and experimental theories of modern science. The old dogma, for instance, that the earth is the fixed centre of the Universe, was generally laughed at by the higher students of the Oriental, as well as by those of the English Department of the Delhi College. But the learned men, who lived in the city, did not like this innovation on their much-loved theories of the ancient Greek Philosophy, which had been cultivated among them for many centuries past.' Later, Andrews recalls what Zakaullah had told him. 'Munshi Zaka Ullah, in his old age, used to tell me with kindling eyes, how eagerly these scientific lectures were followed, and how, after each lecture, the notes used to be studied, over and over again, and copied out by many hands.'

According to Sadiqur Rahman Kidwai, the college used to advertise in the city public talks or demonstrations related to physical sciences.<sup>27</sup> It is quite possible that Ghalib, who had an inquisitive mind and remained curious all his life, heard details of these events from his friends if he did not actually attend any of them. He knew the Principal of the College fairly well. He also knew 'Master' Ram Chandra, and considered him a dear friend; the latter, on his part, brought Ghalib much comfort in those terrible months after the British recaptured Delhi when Ghalib's non-Muslim friends alone could visit him. Much later, when the Commissioner of Delhi organized a scholarly gathering by the name of Delhi Society in 1865, Ghalib, despite his old age, responded to the Society's invitation and attended its second meeting on August 11, 1865. He sat through two papers, one on the Mahajani system in India by the society's vice-president, Lala Sahib Singh, and the second on the benefits of studying History by Munshi Jivan Lal. He then himself read a short note—seated in his chair for he could not stand for long—on the destruction of the city and the hard times that followed.<sup>28</sup>

Two major Muslim scholars of the time, Maulavi Mamluk Ali and Maulavi Imam Bakhsh Sahba'i, taught at the College,

<sup>27</sup> Kidwai, *Mâstar*, p. 18.

<sup>28</sup> Abdus Sattar Siddiqui, '*Dihlî Sosâ'itî aur Mirzâ Ghalib*,' in *Aligarh Magazine, Ghalib Number* (Urdu), 24:2 (1948-49), pp. 57-60.

while Mufti Sadruddin Azurda, another prominent Muslim scholar, was one of its Honorary Examiners. All three were close friends of Ghalib. As for any lasting influence of the College, we need only recall that among its alumni were such future luminaries as Nazir Ahmad, the novelist, Zakauallah, the historian, and Muhammad Husain Azad, the literary critic, essayist and one of the founders of the 'New Poetry' movement in Urdu. The great seminal figure, Syed Ahmad Khan, was too senior to have been a student at the College, but when he was the Munsif in Delhi (1846–1855) he informally studied with Maulavi Mamluk Ali and was quite familiar with the work of the College and the Translation Society, as is evident in his own efforts later to produce scientific literature in Urdu on similar lines. It will be no exaggeration to say that what C. F. Andrews tentatively referred to as 'the Delhi Renaissance' was much more due to the Delhi College than to any other institution.<sup>29</sup> Except, of course, the printing press and Urdu newspapers.

One wonders what could have been the state of general literacy and education in South Asia today if either Akbar or Jahangir had ordered a few printing presses from Europe and had them set up in Agra and Delhi, if only for their own and their nobles' use. The two emperors were shown printed books and engraved pictures by their European visitors—as were the nobles—but strangely enough neither the Emperors nor the nobles showed any interest in the revolutionary new process of producing books. One reason may have been the lack of a 'Protestant' spirit in Indian Islam at that time. That spirit or something like it, in my tentative opinion, appeared in Delhi only in the early decades of the nineteenth century. I find it significant that when Shah Abdul Qadir and Shah Rafiuddin published their translations of the Qur'an they felt no obligation to add commentaries; they apparently considered their literate co-religionists—men and women—capable of making sense of their common faith by accessing its scripture through Urdu, a language considered too common-place and unworthy for such purposes only a few years earlier. We get some sense of the reach and influence of these translations in

<sup>29</sup> Andrews, *Zaka Ullah*, p. 40.

Syed Ahmad Khan's note on Shah Abdul Aziz where he decries a habit among the people of his own time [i.e. the 1840s]: '[At present] every commoner [*'āmī*] believes himself to be scholar [*'ālim*] and every ignoramus regards himself as a learned man. Merely on the basis of having read a few chapbooks on religious issues and a translation of the Qur'an, and that too in Urdu, with some ordinary teacher [*ustād*] or just through his own effort, he considers himself a jurist and an exegete and dares to preach and opine on issues. This bane of our time that has spread like a plague over all Hindustan, but in particular in Shahjahanabad . . . was not present during [Shah Abdul Aziz's] time.'<sup>30</sup> That spirit of inquiry and that confidence in affirming one's faith even in the face of opposing traditions, I believe, became only stronger after the Revolt, when lay Muslims like Syed Ahmad Khan and Nazir Ahmad, felt no hesitancy in translating and commenting on the Qur'an in Urdu in the light of their own understanding and experience, and when Mirza Ghulam Ahmad of Qadiyan began to publish his own visionary/sectarian writings within the rubric of Islam.

The first printing press in India was set up in 1550 by the Portuguese, and the earliest printed book now extant in any Indian language is said to be a copy of the second edition of a 'Malabar Tamul' prayer book published in 1559.<sup>31</sup> As for Persian and Urdu, we must wait till the beginning of the nineteenth century, when books in these languages were published in Calcutta under the auspices of the College of Fort William. It was also in Calcutta that the first Urdu and Persian newspaper appeared in the 1820s. But the true spread of the Urdu press occurred only after the newly discovered technology of litho printing reached India. It was much less expensive, and, more significantly, it could also immediately use the professional calligraphers already available everywhere, thus retaining the aesthetic quality of manuscripts. By 1840, there were Urdu presses and newspapers all over North India, often more than one in

<sup>30</sup> Syed Ahmad Khan, *Āsār-al-Sanādīd*, ed. Khaliq Anjum (New Delhi, 1990), vol. II, p. 56.

<sup>31</sup> Nadir Ali Khan, *Hindustānī Pres 1556 tā 1900* (Lucknow, 1990), p. 16.

major cities. The first important Urdu newspaper in Delhi was a weekly, *Dihlī Akbār*, later *Dihlī Urdū Akbār*, which was started in 1837; its first editor was Maulavi Muhammad Akbar, the father of Maulavi Muhammad Baqir and the grandfather of Muhammad Husain Azad.<sup>32</sup> The next important Urdu press and weekly—*Sayyad-al-Akbār*—were started in 1841 by Syed Ahmad Khan's brother, Syed Muhammad Khan, who published the first editions of Ghalib's Urdu *dīvān* and Syed Ahmad Khan's *Āsār-al-Sanādīd*. Between 1837 and 1857, there were at least five weeklies, two bi-monthlies, and one monthly in Urdu that were published from Delhi for varying lengths of time, including two important journals published by 'Master' Ram Chandra whose role in the spread of modern learning in the elite of Delhi, both Muslim and Hindu, is yet to be fully understood.<sup>33</sup> There were of course many other newspapers that came into Delhi from other cities and were quoted by local journals.

What is important for us to note is that (1) several of the people involved in these endeavours also had ties with the Delhi College; (2) that these newspapers regularly carried not only news but also informative articles on a wide range of subjects; and (3) that the period between 1835 and 1857 was also the time when the press in British India was relatively most free of governmental control or censorship. Ghalib himself was an avid reader of newspapers; he was also a natural pamphleteer, as became evident in the controversy that raged around *Burhān-i-Qāti'*. Ghalib enjoyed and exploited the benefits of printing as no Urdu poet before him could have conceived of. It may be fair to believe that he, thereby, rapidly reached an audience markedly different in number and kind from what would have been the case otherwise.

It is important to underscore the fact that neither the aged Emperor nor any member of his household was in any way involved with either the Delhi College or the various presses and newspapers in the city. No doubt, the Fort had its own

<sup>32</sup> Nadir Ali Khan, *Urdu Sahāfat kī Tārīk* (Aligarh, 1987), pp. 75, 83. My comments on the Urdu press are based on the above two excellent books by Nadir Ali Khan.

<sup>33</sup> Kidwai, *Māstar*, pp. 148–167.

Persian weekly, but it was merely a chronicle of the King's daily activities. Bahadur Shah II did not patronize any scholarly work. Even the unfinished history of the Mughal dynasty that he asked Ghalib to compose in 1850—for which Ghalib received three sonorous titles and a monthly stipend of Rs. 50—was no more than an exercise in Persian composition. The contrast becomes the more acute when we note that, around the same time and in the same city of Delhi, Henry Eliot could prepare the many volumes of his contentious *History of India as Told by its Historians* by exploiting the personal library of Nawab Ziyauddin Khan, an intimate friend of Ghalib's, and that the Vernacular Translation Society published Urdu translations of histories of England, Rome, Greece and Iran, even a world history.<sup>34</sup>

In presenting these details, my purpose has been to underscore the reality that Ghalib's Delhi (i.e. the Delhi that Hali mourned) was not the Delhi of Akbar and Shahjahan—in fact it was not even the Delhi of Muhammad Shah and Shah Alam. There was more prosperity and security in Delhi itself by the 1830s than the city had experienced at any time in the preceding one hundred years. More importantly, there were also many new ideas and institutions and several new technologies, whose impact was gradually being felt by an increasing number of people, particularly in urban centres such as Delhi. Ghalib, unlike any other writer of his generation, shows an awareness of these developments in his writings. This is not to suggest that Ghalib was a product of his times, or that his poetry was inspired by the ideas taught at Delhi College. To dispel any such misconception we need only to recall that Ghalib had completed most of his Urdu *dīvān* by 1816, when he was only nineteen years old! In fact, between 1820 and 1850, Ghalib turned his back on Urdu and the Urdu poets of Delhi and wrote almost exclusively in Persian. His Persian and Urdu ghazals, however, share a common

<sup>34</sup> The surprising ease with which Hali refers to Greek and Hindu philosophers and legends in his various essays could have come only from his familiarity with the publications of the College. The same may be said for his interest in political economy.

questioning mind boldly engaging itself with the imponderables of human existence.

To sum up, while making any attempt to obtain a sense of what Ghalib's Delhi was like, we should at least bear the following in mind.

(1) Delhi indeed enjoyed in the pre-Revolt decades what later came to be called the 'English Peace,' and it rapidly became a vigorous, urban, consumer society, attracting to itself money and people once again. What that *Pax Britannica* did to the rural society and to various indigenous industries is another matter. These matters, however, did not concern Ghalib—his worries were limited to his pension and his friends—and his peers.

(2) The people in the Red Fort, including the Emperor, had scarce resources and also limited interests. One finds little evidence of any creative energy in them. No doubt, the pathetic end of Bahadur Shah II arouses our sympathy, which we then extend to the Fort and what it stands for now in general estimate. But we can do better by noting what Maulavi Zakaullah told C. F. Andrews on that subject:

I knew Old Delhi. I also knew well the Royal Palace; for I went there as a boy. I know what happened there better, perhaps, than anyone who is alive today. For almost everyone is now dead who could remember it, as I could, by personal experience of what it meant. All I can say about it is this, that the present with all its glaring faults is better than that which I knew when I was a boy. People speak of the 'good old times'; but those times, as a whole, were not good, when they are compared with the days in which we are now living. They were full of corruption and decay.'<sup>35</sup>

(3) It is indeed amazing to find in Delhi in the first half of the nineteenth century such an array of distinguished people: Shah Abdul Aziz, Shah Abdul Qadir, Maulavi Mamluk Ali, Allama Fazle Haq Khairabadi, Asadullah Khan Ghalib, Momin Khan Momin, Muhammad Ibrahim Zauq, Maulavi Imam Bakhsh Sahba'i, Mufti Sadruddin Azurda, Nawab Mustafa Khan

<sup>35</sup> Andrews, *Zaka Ullah*, p. 19. Also supported by scattered reports in different newspapers of that time.

Shefta, 'Master' Ram Chandra, and Syed Ahmad Khan. It was the new sense of security which made that gathering possible; otherwise, as had happened in the second half of the preceding century, some of them might not have come to Delhi, while some others would have emigrated from there. Of the above, Sahba'i, Mamluk Ali and Ram Chandra taught at the Delhi College; Azurda and Fazle Haq served in the British administration, as did Fazle Haq's father and Syed Ahmad Khan; Momin, like Ghalib, received a pension from the British, while Shefta owed his estate entirely to the new rulers. Only Zauq and the two religious teachers, Shah Abdul Aziz and Shah Abdul Qadir, did not receive any sustained patronage from the British. We may however note that Shah Abdul Aziz, by petitioning the British, did manage to get back in 1807 a large land grant that he had unfairly lost, twenty years earlier, to a widow of the Emperor Muhammad Shah.<sup>36</sup>

(4) We should also be clear in our minds about the so-called 'Delhi Renaissance,' which is now generally believed to have come to a sad end in 1857. If it refers merely to the simultaneous presence in Delhi of the above-named luminaries, we must note that, by the middle of the nineteenth century, they were already fast disappearing due to natural causes. If, on the other hand, our concern is with ideas and scholarship, we may wish to make some further distinctions:

(a) So far as traditional Islamic learning is concerned, none of the above made any original contribution, though the legal opinions of Shah Abdul Aziz concerning English education and employment with the British and the Urdu translations of the Qur'an by his brothers can be said to have had significant impact on educated Muslims. A far more significant revival and enhancement of the traditional branches of Islamic learning had already taken place earlier—in the eighteenth

<sup>36</sup> S. A. A. Rizvi, 'Shah Abdul Aziz's Madad-i Ma'ash in Delhi, and the British,' in *Islamic Society and Culture*, ed. M. Israel & N. K. Wagle (New Delhi, 1983), pp. 135–147. In *Āsār-al-Sanādīd*, first edition, Syed Ahmad Khan listed a few other notable persons who were in the British service, namely Hakim Ghulam Najaf Khan, Maulavi Rashiduddin Khan, Maulavi Muhammad Jan, and Mir Nizamuddin Mamnun.



century—at the hands of Shah Waliullah in Delhi and Mullah Nizamuddin Siharvi in Lucknow.

(b) In the area of Urdu literature, Ghalib, of course, towered above all his contemporaries, but he continued to be productive after the Revolt, particularly in the form of Urdu letters to his numerous admirers. The publication of these letters in 1868 no doubt played some role in the development of modern Urdu prose. Zauq and Momin died before 1857. They were competent poets but not of the same rank as Ghalib—they get mentioned now because they were Ghalib's peers. Likewise Azurda, Sahba'i and Shefta are remembered today merely because they were Ghalib's friends. The second seminal figure, besides Ghalib, is Syed Ahmad Khan, but his greatest achievements come after 1857. We should also bear in mind that, between 1800 and 1850, notable contributions to Urdu literature were also made elsewhere, e.g. in Lucknow by the great *marṣiya* writers, and in Calcutta by the *munṣif*s working under the direction of John Gilchrist at the College of Fort William.

(c) In the domain of scientific thought and education, we see that Delhi College played the crucial role. The College and the Vernacular Translation Society produced an impressive number of scholarly books in Urdu, and thus made available both the 'Oriental' and the Western learned traditions to a large audience. As mentioned earlier, at the College even the students specializing in Arabic and Sanskrit were required to study Mathematics, Physics, Chemistry, Geography, and History. They learned new ways to think. Delhi College was too modest a place to produce research scientists—though 'Master' Ram Chandra, who first studied and later taught there, was perhaps the first modern mathematician of India—but it contributed immensely to the development of a new intellectual discourse among the people of Delhi. To return to the popular metaphor of a 'garden,' it may be rightly asserted that Delhi College—as also the colleges at Agra and Benares—did the work of planting and seeding, and that the plants that came up were *not* knocked down by the hot wind of the Revolt, though the College itself was, first through the wanton destruction by Indian soldiers and local hooligans, and then by the deliberate neglect of some British

officers and the increasing importance of Lahore as an educational centre. Those plants, so far as the Muslims and Urdu are concerned, in fact grew into giant trees and bore much fruit in the second half of the nineteenth century, in the writings of Nazir Ahmad, Zakaullah, Muhammad Husain Azad, and Piyare Lal Ashob. Though no alumni themselves, both Syed Ahmad Khan and Altaf Husain Hali were familiar with the work done at the College, and can confidently be said to have been influenced by it. In other words, the 'renaissance' initiated by the College did not end with it, it gathered greater strength with time, and its arena expanded to include all of North India.

But there also happened certain qualitative shifts soon after the Revolt which deserve to be noticed.

First, the 'Renaissance' was no longer definable exclusively in terms of a language, Urdu, or a place, Delhi. It rapidly took on a communal, i.e. Muslim, identity, as its surviving luminaries and new stalwarts devoted themselves to the cause of the two major Muslim groups which had directly been effected by the aftermath of the Revolt. Recalling an older phrase, the two may be best identified as the 'men of sword' [*sâhibân-i-saif*] and the 'men of pen', [*sâhibân-i-qalam*], who together formed the majority of those who as a whole were called the *surafâ*. The first group suffered rapid decline with the expansion of the afore-mentioned *Pax Brittanica*, while the second group lost ground slowly and due to many factors: the rise in the use of English, and later of regional languages, in administrative work; the linking of jobs with educational qualifications as against the earlier importance of family and heritage; the relatively more rapid educational progress of the numerically larger similar Hindu groups; and the earlier such advance made by Bengali Hindus who now began to be present all over North India in various professional and administrative roles. The new elite Muslim identity soon became the old reform movement's dominant defining feature, and as such became enmeshed in time with issues of political power and nationhood. I may add, that since its umbilical tie with Urdu was not cut, other languages spoken by millions of Muslims in India, such as Bengali, Sindhi and Punjabi, were marginalized in the overwhelming perspective

adopted by Muslim leaders seeking social and political resurgence.

Secondly, the earlier urge for scientific learning in its own right was replaced after the Revolt with a greater concern for the economic uplift of the 'salaried' classes among the Muslims, as is evident in the writings identified with the so-called Aligarh Movement. As a result, Urdu too eventually got marginalized in favour of English—the M.A.O. College of Syed Ahmad Khan did not make Urdu its medium of instruction, as had been the case at the Delhi College. The pursuit of scientific knowledge through the medium of Urdu was taken up again only in the second decade of the next century and only at the Osmania University at Hyderabad.

To conclude, it may perhaps be more accurate to say that experientially there had really been two Delhis for Ghalib, one of the time before the May 1857 and the other of after October 1857, the two separated by the traumatic days of the Revolt and its brutal aftermath. Hali, a person of humbler means and rank than Ghalib and living in Panipat, never fully experienced the former, and later made sense of what little he had seen in terms of the feelings evoked in him by the early days of the latter. That 'first' Delhi of Ghalib's experience was not the final gasp of a 'candle' which briefly lit up its surroundings, allegedly with its original Mughal brilliance. The 'candle' was neither of Mughal make, nor did it die out with the Mutiny; it was something new, a product of Indo-British collaboration, and though it sputtered greatly in 1857, it continued to burn and give light. Nor was it a 'garden' that had already seen its spring and was then fully destroyed during the Revolt. If anything, it was 'a garden yet to be fully created,' and Ghalib was its 'nightingale,' singing away, 'warmed by the ecstasy of Imagination.'<sup>37</sup> The Delhi of the first half of the nineteenth century was an exciting and wonderful place for those who experienced it, particularly the intelligentsia, because it contained something new and vital and was perceived by many as the harbinger of a future

<sup>37</sup> Ghalib's Urdu verse: *hûñ garmî-i-naşât-i-tasavvur se nagma-sanj // main 'andalib-i-gulshan-i-na-âfrîda hûñ* (I sing away, warmed by the ecstasy of Imagination; I'm the nightingale of a garden not yet created).

markedly different from its past, and not because it displayed some re-vivified past as so many later Urdu writers, confusing the citadel with the city and overwhelmed by the rising tide of political and cultural nationalism in the country, convinced themselves to believe.

In 1969, Ralph Russell and Khurshidul Islam wrote, '... Mughal culture and English culture met in [the fifty years before the Revolt] on terms of mutual respect. This situation was ended by the upheaval of 1857 and is only now, a century later, again being generally restored.'<sup>38</sup> If that restoration has progressed—and I believe that it has—and if that restoration was worth the effort—and I strongly believe that it was—then a further important step has now become incumbent upon us. Since Benedict Anderson's *Imagined Communities*, we have learned to think twice about our convenient, all purpose imperatives of nationhood and nationalism. Now, in a similar manner, we need to be more thoughtful about the complex, often quite paradoxical, role that the colonial rule played in the lives of the different sections of the Indian people at different times. An important ancillary to that process would be an effort on the part of Urdu scholars to recover the life of the mind of that Urdu intelligentsia of long ago—Hindu, Muslim and Christian—who found excitement, and discovered new and creative ways to define and express themselves, in that initial sustained encounter with what eventually became an oppressive colonial rule. A half century after that rule's end, we need to undertake this task just as much for our own sake as for the sake of those remarkable people of long ago. We may be right to reject the history books of the mature Zakaullah as uncritical paeans to the British rule, but we will be missing out on something precious, not only in him but in ourselves, if we don't make any effort to understand the boy Zakaullah who would come home, all excited, his head buzzing with new ideas.

<sup>38</sup> Russell & Islam, *Ghalib*, p. 32.

## URDU TEXTS AND CONTEXTS

The essays collected here, eclectic in methodology but often written 'against the grain', offer fresh perspectives on diverse Urdu texts vital to the cultural history of India, and on the equally diverse literary, social, and performative contexts historically identified with the Urdu language in South Asia and beyond.

Significantly, several of these essays deal with texts that are usually not considered a part of the Urdu literary canon, e.g. an autobiographical fragment by a schoolmistress born in 1840, transvestic verses written by men disguised as women, and anonymous jokes about the Emperor Akbar and his favourite 'jokester', Birbal.

While some essays offer close readings of literary texts, most explore the dialectical relationship between Urdu texts and their varying cultural and political contexts: e.g. public performances, the state patronage of literature, the nature of political propaganda, patriarchal Muslim society in India, and so on. Text and context is thus a method for exploring some of the major themes of Indian cultural history, specifically in relation to the domains of literary creation and reception.

The selection here represents Professor Naim's lifelong interest in broadening the field of Urdu Literature into the more inclusive and interdisciplinary field of Urdu Studies. As such, all who are interested in the sociology of Literature in South Asia or the social history of the Muslims of North India will find much that is new and exciting in this book.



Endpaper illustration by Sheela Roy.  
Cover design by Neelima Rao

Rs 495

ISBN 81-7824-075-0

